

You **CAN** Teach an Old Dog New Tricks

The common idiom “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks” is interpreted as “people who have long been used to doing things in a particular way will not abandon their habits” (*The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, 2003). Research shows that you are unlikely to abandon a habit unless there is a strong motivator to do so, but then, you can change.

The majority of what we do, think, observe and perceive on a daily basis is handled subconsciously, by our habits. Within a stable environment, habits are those behaviors that require little thought to start or stop. These habits are nothing more than strong, stable and highly connected chains of neurons in our brain – the wiring, so to speak. Research has shown that while this wiring is critical in dealing efficiently with the world, our brains are not “hard-wired”. Indeed, the brain has a tremendous capability to adjust and adapt as needed. The trick is in establishing and supporting the need for change.

1. Going for the challenge

Whether your golf swing or how you conduct meetings, once a behavior is habituated, performance becomes automatic within a moderately stable environment. Governed by strong neural connections, there is only limited improvement that can be made. Only by accepting the challenge of going beyond competence to growth will you begin to lay the groundwork to reach a new level.

2. Create the motivation

You have identified the change to be made; now you must link it with strong and clear motivations. What are the specific benefits that will come to you? Vague benefits such as “I’ll feel better”, “I’ll accomplish more” are unlikely to support you in overcoming the brain’s natural resistance to change. Keep asking yourself “why” until you get to specific, measurable outcomes that you really want, for example, “My waist size will shrink by 2 inches and I will be able to hike in the mountains this summer.”

3. Create a structure

When actions are inconsistent with an existing habit, the brain signals an error. Emotions, including fear and discomfort, are triggered, along with a reduced capability for rational thought. It is no wonder that habits are so hard to break when our brains are naturally designed to sabotage change efforts. Structures, including notes in your diary, buddy systems, tally sheets, daily affirmations, etc., support a change by reducing the need to think and make decisions, as well as providing a sense of security when the brain is sending out warning signals.

4. Pay attention

Attention focused on the new habit closely enough, often enough and long enough builds and strengthens the neural connections. Talking about the change, establishing plans, reviewing progress, visualizing the outcome, thinking about new ways to get there are all mechanisms for increasing attention and the likelihood of creating a new habit.

5. Celebrate

Every step on the way to a new habit should be celebrated. The good feelings release chemicals in the brain that mark the new neural connections for preservation.

As the new neural connections become stronger, the change becomes easier.
Success breeds motivation, which breeds further success.

You can teach yourself new tricks, when you choose to make a change, know why you are making the change, provide structures to support the change, focus positive energy and attention, and celebrate each step along the way.

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