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Habits of a Lifetime

Good and bad habits are linked to your lifestyle

Whether out of choice or necessity, all creatures live their lives to a pattern, humans included. A means to survive is generally the prime motivator when setting this up. Food is an essential and also most important is shelter, a roof over one's head. They cost money which has to come from somewhere; so a paying job needs to be secured to pay for these and other comforts on a daily and weekly basis. This entails adopting a routine to satisfy both the employer's schedule and the worker's everyday requirements; and often it is a juggling act to fit everything in. Once established, however, the same pattern tends to be repeated enough times so that the individual rarely has trouble remembering what to do next. In effect, the major elements of survival eventually become habitual repetitions.

There is nothing wrong with this because they are, in the main, good habits. While following them, certain associations will appear in between events and protocols, like meal times and coffee breaks; perhaps a phone call to a relation or friend. They become so frequent that missing out on just one seems to irk. In fact, the consumption of food and beverages is so closely linked to specific times of day that the body's clock knows when they should happen; and if they don't there can be a physical, certainly a mental reaction: "Where's my lunch? It's two o'clock already and I'm starving! And how am I supposed to concentrate when I haven't had my morning tea break?" When the pattern of normality has been disrupted; the body isn't happy.

Going without what has become a particular necessity is hardly life-threatening; and yet, although maybe only temporary, it can cause irritation. So, what's the big deal? Well, the sufferer might reason, you can't have one without the other – it's stressful. Again, this is an over-reaction, an excuse really. Made even worse by an addition such as a biscuit or a cake, the simple quick cuppa during a regular break extends into a more satisfying interlude; so much so that the extras soon become a necessary part of the daily routine. The pairing of a hot drink and certain types of food has been established; and it is unlikely to stay in the workplace where it was initially established. Once back home it is realised that a cup of tea or coffee needs something else to hit the spot.

As well as food, a smoke or two can also serve that purpose. After all, what's a coffee without a fag? Of course it is a really bad habit and we all know that, or should; but smoking is so addictive that it rapidly establishes its own place in the lifestyle pattern. Being a mild sedative it can relieve stress, and here is another association that is accepted as a quick-fix in pressure situations; however, the enjoyment and satisfaction experienced on the odd occasion soon becomes a frequent need in itself. The number of smokes eventually increases to the point where a cigarette is a dire necessity; and time-out has to be allocated on a routine basis for many puffs during the course of the day. The normal schedule has to be adapted to incorporate a new element squeezed in between whatever else the smoker ought to have been doing. The pattern is changing; the associations are multiplying.

This is the thin end of the wedge. Morning tea with friends soon graduates to more than a chat over a drink. Cakes are included, often an assortment to satisfy individual tastes. What originated as a half-hour social occasion, the brief respite during a busy day evolves into two hours of binging on some most unhealthy foodstuffs. Cream cakes, chocolate éclairs, apple strudels with custard and cream, doughnuts topped with icing sugar; these not only cause weight gain and major health conditions, but consumed on a very regular basis they stretch the stomach at the wrong time of day. The result is a feeling of emptiness once the food has been metabolised and the hunger pangs start even before the normal lunchtime. So the midday meal becomes another hunger-buster, the satisfaction of which only lasts until mid-afternoon when an interim snack is needed to bridge the gap prior to the evening meal. And when that finally arrives, the moderate serve that always used to be sufficient no longer does the job. The more we eat, the more we are likely to consume on the next food break. The unhealthy associations are compounded; and the amended pattern is no longer about mere survival: it is motivated by purely selfish, habitual needs.

Not really wishing to rub it in, although I believe we should all face the truth for the sake of our health, those links bordering on over-indulgence are doing major harm, particularly the highly addictive ones. Smoking is bad enough, but when a single drink of alcohol becomes two and three then five glasses; which, of course, seem more satisfying having a cigarette with each one, the problem is compounded and proportionate. The smoke dries the throat requiring lubrication; and as more alcohol continues to be drunk the head becomes muzzy; then, any reasoning that might have advocated caution is destined not to return until tomorrow's hangover. Unfortunately, when that eventually subsides, another booze-fag-fest starts up. The original pattern has been interfered with yet again.

What's the answer to this self-destructive path we are on? It's quite simple – get off it and find a better, safer road back to a healthier lifestyle. Break the bad habits by initially substituting less-harmful additions. Forget the biscuit with tea during the morning break: just be satisfied with the drink, then get back to work; and if you have missed out on that, have a drink or two of plain water. Avoid fattening foods at any time. Cut them down gradually to the point where you can take or leave them. And watch out for those habit-forming soft drinks loaded with caffeine and sugar. Your mind might think you need them, but your body certainly doesn't. Adopt the premise: everything in moderation, nothing to excess. Make that work and you will get back to the pattern that offers a longer, far healthier life.

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