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# Becoming your better self as reason for changing behavior

By **Winifred Gebhardt**, Leiden University, The Netherlands

About nine years ago, I became a vegetarian overnight. In a novel I was reading, the main character explained how he could not eat anything “in which at some time a heart had been beating”. Like a thunderbolt these few words sunk in. I realized that this was exactly how I felt. I stopped eating meat and fish instantly, and I have not had any problem sticking to this new diet ever since. The new behavior perfectly fitted the “person I am”. Conversely, in the past I used to jog regularly and could easily run seven kilometers. However, I never regarded myself as a “sporty person”, and whenever a barrier occurred such as being ill, I lapsed into being a couch potato. I now no longer try to “be sporty” but do try to walk whenever I can during the day. I consider myself an “active person”.

## Our actions reflect our self

My behavior of “not eating animals” matches my self-perception. Being and behaving as a vegetarian gives me a

positive view of my “self” as a caring, considerate person, who loves animals. Every time I talk about this choice, or decline a dish with meat, my “self” **gets affirmed**.

Knowing that we perceive what we do as part of who we are and want to feel good about ourselves, is an extremely useful starting point for health interventions. For example, looking for how positive self-views derived from our unhealthy behavior (e.g., drinking quite a bit of wine during dinner since I consider myself someone who enjoys the good life), can be served by other, less harmful or even healthy, behavior (e.g., drinking a non-alcohol alternative that still reflects a relaxed lifestyle). Key to change then is making what we do relevant to the type of person we consider ourselves to really be. This so-called **integrated motivation to change is, according to Self-Determination theory**, the closest we can get to pure intrinsic motivation, in which we perform a behavior because of the joy of it.

## Part of our self lives in the future

We humans are excellent time-travelers, and **spend almost half of our time fantasizing** about the future. In it, we generate a multitude of possibilities for ourselves in this future; options that have been called **"Possible Selves"**. **They direct our imagery**, and increase our openness to goal-related opportunities. For instance, a future self-image as being a 'quitter' or 'nonsmoker' greatly increases quit-intentions, quit-attempts, and also quit-success. Smokers thus need to be able to picture themselves as "future nonsmokers" before they can actually quit. My colleague Eline Meijer and I, currently conduct studies in which smokers imagine the type of person they will become if they quit smoking, and if they continue to smoke. Participants write about these images and provide pictures /photos that they associate with them. The intervention generates images such as: If I quit I will become "a strong, clever woman with character" or "a more balanced, carefree father and lover", and conversely: If I will continue to smoke I will become "a coughing, panting and miserable old woman" or "an anti-social, stinking, weak man in pain". A first striking finding is that most of the provided pictures/photos are symbolic in nature, and do not contain smoking people or products. Written associations with the pictures include: "carefree", "complete" and "decisive" versus "junky", "depressive", and "hopeless". We still have to investigate whether the intervention changes behavior, but we suspect that having these 'self-images' readily accessible when needed, e.g., during cravings, helps to stay on track. Evidence for the effectiveness of imagined future self interventions already exists for other **health behaviors such as exercising**.

## We thrive in groups where we feel we belong

In daily life, resisting cravings or temptations may be particularly difficult in social situations. As a quitter, you may fear social rejection once you no longer behave in line with your friends and relatives. You may also miss out on appreciated shared activities. Quite a lot of our self-perceptions are based on the social groups we belong to. For example, **most people who smoke or use drugs affiliate with people who also use the same substance**.

Using substances is a key norm behavior that defines "being part of the group". This in turn, is associated with all sorts of other valued qualities. For example, **youngsters after rehab**, may experience that their 'cannabis using' friends are still the people who "fit them best", even now they are clean. Non-using others are easily seen as less supportive of their personal values, are more boring, or lack their own "wits, loyalty and level of maturity". This illustrates that the challenge of how to remain a valued member of the own social group should be on top of our agenda when trying to support healthy lifestyles. Thus, to establish lasting change, we need people to develop positive selfrepresentations in which they can see their future self perform the new healthy behavior that is both in line with their own important values, as well as with their social environment.

## Practical recommendations

- **Behavior has direct importance to the experience and image of oneself.** Encourage people to creatively think about who they can become, for example by making mood boards of both their ideal and feared future selves.
- **Find ways in which self-views** that are linked to the new behavior can be retrieved at critical moments such as craving or temptations. For example, stick the self-generated mood boards to the start screen of a PC or smartphone, as reminder cues of why one truly wishes to change.
- **Help people incorporate their new behavior** within the social context they value, for example by practicing acceptable ways of diverting from the group norm. For example, when offered alcohol, this could involve a polite "I really appreciate it, but no thanks (I have had my share for today)", or include the shared bond: "Wow, you are always looking out for me, such a good friend you are. How are you holding up lately?"