

Spreading awareness to Change Social Norms

There seems to be a pretty clear and universal definition in every culture of what beauty is, what being “cool” is, and what is considered to be socially acceptable. The desire to comply with these definitions in order to fit in and not be considered an outsider is a part of human nature. For example, in western culture, being tan is considered to be beautiful and so, every summer, thousands of Americans lie under the sun for hours, often times without sunscreen, in hopes of gaining some color. Furthermore, today, being cool in high school is equivalent to participating in illegal activities or acting rebellious. All the “cool” kids are doing drugs, excessively drinking alcohol, and/or smoking cigarettes. Thus, in order to fit in, one must partake in these activities as well. Western society also loves fast food chains, copious amounts of salt and sugar, and processed foods. A popular challenge that was trending all over social media throughout past year was the ten-thousand-calorie challenge in which one records oneself consuming ten thousand calories within 24 hours. There are hundreds of people all over YouTube showing themselves devouring dozens of donuts, chocolate, fries, hamburgers, etc. in order to complete this challenge. As time progresses and technology becomes more advanced, society tends to increasingly promote unhealthy choices and habits that ultimately increase the risks for cancer many folds.

Most of these individuals know that their habits are not healthy, yet they still continue living with the same lifestyle. For instance, from a young age we are told that “smoking is bad for you.” Yet, smoking today is still the leading cause of cancer related deaths (Furrukh, 2013). Their reason for their lack of change is simple—living healthy is hard. It is hard to start, hard to maintain, and hard to “fit in” with. Why would someone want to be the only pale one in the group? Why would someone want to give up fried food? The consequences of living unhealthily are not immediate and thus people do not feel much of an incentive or urge to take on the preventative measures while they still can. Many tell themselves, “I’ll start living healthy next month” and eventually “next month” becomes next year. In addition, as mentioned before, seeing friends, family, and people all over the internet engage in unhealthy habits is hard to cope with and tempts one to give up. A common example is shown in the many individuals who make a New Year’s resolution every year to start eating healthy or start exercising more. Yes, they probably do fulfill their promise for the next few weeks or so. However, soon enough, most people will have resumed their old lifestyle and the cycle repeats again the following year. So the question is: How do we convince people to *want* to be healthy? This essay will focus on the different aspects of the Social Cognitive Theory, how it relates to the transtheoretical model of change, and how principles from this theory can bring about lasting changes in an individual as well as an entire community. Only by finding *viable and convincing* methods will society be able to create new norms and promote healthier choices and behavior.

Social Cognitive Theory.

The Social Cognitive Theory is a very popular psychology theory that is used to explain individuals’ learning process and behaviors that result from different social contexts, experiences, and observations (Bandura, 1177; “Social and Behavioral Theories 1. Learning Objectives,” n.d.) Reciprocal Determinism, a main component of the Social Cognitive Theory, was developed by Albert Bandura and is centered around the concept that “a person can be both

an agent for change and a responder to change” (“Social and Behavioral Theories 1. Learning Objectives,” n.d.). His theory focuses on three major components that are all interrelated to each other: personal, behavioral, and environmental factors. Personal factors refer to individuals’ motivation and self-efficacy (how much control one has) towards a certain action (Bandura, 1177). For example, students who *believe* that they can do well by studying tend to have more motivation and spend more time studying than students who simply believe studying to be a cause. Behavioral factors refer to the responses that individuals receive from performing a specific action, affecting future behavioral choices (Bandura, 1177). Continuing the same example, students who received a good grade on the exam may attribute their success to their studying habits. Thus, these students may use the same habits for the next exam, whereas those who did not perform as well may resort to new methods. Lastly, environmental aspects are factors from the environment, such as money, that also affect behavioral changes. For example, environmental factors like popularity in schools may affect both personal and behavioral responses. Being “cool” in some high schools may correlate with receiving bad grades in classes and this classification may induce certain behavioral responses (getting teased from getting a good grade). Because of this correlation, the smarter kids in high school may feel a social pressure to essentially do poorly on tests, lowering their motivation and self-efficacy. Students must consider the questions: Is it more worth it to be cool or to get a better grade? How much will my social reputation drop? Does this grade even matter? Personal, behavioral, and environmental factors are all constantly influencing each other. Individuals must evaluate a multitude of different aspects and ultimately find a balance before behaving a certain way. By examining these three main factors, more efficient and better methods to promote healthy lifestyles can be found and utilized

Personal.

According to the transtheoretical model of change, there are 5 stages people go through when taking on a relatively large behavioral change: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance (van Leer, Hapner, & Connor, 2008). One of the hardest parts of change is the actual initiation of it. The precontemplation and contemplation stages in the model are affected by many different personal factors, including one’s level of self-efficacy, motivation, and expectancies. People know that they have to give up certain habits, leisure activities, foods, etc. in order to start a new lifestyle. This is without a doubt a difficult decision and many feel that they will be unable to effectively execute these changes. A couple plausible ways that may help ease the concerns and bring about changes are mentioned below.

1. Emphasis on making changes in moderation

In order to make the precontemplation and contemplation stages easier, it is important to emphasize that changes can and should be made in moderation, slowly at a time. For instance, for those who wish to quit smoking, it is not essential for them to abandon cigarettes all at once. That would make the process extremely painful and seemingly impossible. Rather, it is much more approachable to cut back a few cigarettes every week and slowly stop this dangerous habit. Self-efficacy is an important factor because it “determines which goals people choose to consider, how long they will persist in the face of failure experiences, the outcome they expect from their efforts, and the effort they invest” (van Leer et al., 2008). People want to feel like they have

control of their paths. However, by setting extreme expectations, individuals will feel overwhelmed and feel like these changes are completely impractical, causing them to not even bother trying. Thus, by making these changes less drastic, people may feel as if their expectations and goals are much more attainable, pushing them past the contemplation stage towards actually executing change.

II. Emphasis of research and understanding

Another factor that impedes individuals from wanting to change their unhealthy ways of life is their lack of understanding of certain risk factors. For instance, people know that UV rays are detrimental to their health and constantly hear about how the sun's rays cause skin cancer. However, few actually understand the mechanisms that promote carcinogenesis. People need to understand that one becomes darker in the sun as a defense mechanism to prevent the sun from causing further damage to the DNA sequences—*not* because of the chemicals from the sun that that many think color one's skin brown. UV rays directly damage the DNA in cells by altering the nucleotide bases, breaking bonds, and forming new irregular bonds within and between the nucleotides. By impairing transcription, these DNA alterations inhibit the production of vital proteins that may be essential for cell regulation (D'Orazio, Jarrett, Amaro-Ortiz, & Scott, 2013; Narayanan, Saladi, & Fox, 2010). Understanding the science behind certain risk factors may be helpful in increasing motivation and increasing the urgency of certain changes. Having higher motivation will also push individuals past the contemplation stages because they feel an obligation to make these changes in order to keep their bodies safe. They will feel that these changes are *required* rather than merely "encouraged" or "helpful".

III. Practicality

Like mentioned before, personal factors such as the feeling of impracticality causes major setbacks in the transtheoretical model. A high level of self-efficacy is key to a successful outcome and is, therefore, vital for people to realize that their goals are practical. A simple way to visualize the practicality is to see before and after pictures of people on certain diets or reading blogs that document an individual's journey on becoming active and healthy. For instance, obesity is a significant risk factor for several different cancers. Many people at a certain weight may feel like it is very unlikely for them to be at a healthy weight again, so they are not as willing to change their dietary habits and continue to live their old lifestyle. However, promoting visuals in weight loss programs or reading about the success stories of others may be able to help demonstrate that any change is possible. Believing in oneself is a huge determinant in change and is crucial in the path of success.

Behavioral.

Behavioral factors play a large role during the preparation, action, and maintenance stages of the transtheoretical model of change. How others and the individual responds to certain changes is extremely important in determining whether or not these changes will be continued or given up.

Many may want to start eating healthy. However, if families and friends choose not to actively support this decision, it may be much harder to maintain those healthy habits. For example, if a person is trying to eat clean, but everyone surrounding that person is eating pizza and drinking

soda at a SuperBowl party, it is extremely difficult continue with that specific diet, ending the transtheoretical model. Moreover, once an individual fails to maintain a certain change or diet, future endeavors may become even harder to start again—their failure may have injured his or her self-efficacy and made the goal seem more unapproachable than it actually is. Therefore, we need to give more focus on combating certain negative behavioral factors as well.

I. Clubs and Communities

Joining clubs at school or in a community is very beneficial in terms of peer support. Members of a club all have the same goals and are beneficial in the sense that they encourage one another. These clubs tend to promote optimism and positivity towards reaching a certain goal (Bandura, 1177). If one wants to start exercising more, joining a running club will be very supportive and will help create longer lasting changes. Joining clubs may also ease up certain social pressures. Even if friends and family are not aiming towards the same goal, individuals will always have another group of people who are and can provide support and inspiration.

II. Positive Reinforcement

Positive reinforcement is a major part of behavioral psychology. It is the process by which awards are given to promote the continuation of a certain behavioral change. There are numerous different types of positive reinforcement that can be used to help maintain new lifestyles. Firstly, individuals can set smaller goals and after each smaller goal is met, they can reward themselves. Rewards could be giving oneself a “cheat day” in which one can eat unhealthy foods for an entire day or tangible gifts like a purse or a shirt. It has been shown in studies that positive reinforcements prolong changes and certain types of behavior (Rosenstock, Strecher, & Becker, 1988). Thus, we need to keep providing ourselves with incentives in order to successfully reach a goal.

There are also many intrinsic positive reinforcements that come with healthy changes in lifestyles. For instance, starting a healthier diet may lead to a decrease in weight which in itself may be enough incentive to maintain the change in behavior. Furthermore, eating the right foods may even make one physically feel better (lack of bloating, stomach aches, etc.) providing even more reinforcement. By taking note of these improvements in weight, health, etc. one may be more inclined to take further action and maintain his or her new lifestyle.

Environmental.

Finally, we have environmental factors. Environmental factors are very important with influencing both individuals and society as a whole. These factors, such as money, convenience, social norms, etc. are extremely influential when it comes to promoting junk foods. And thus, we need to find ways to reverse this influence to target healthy habits. However, such promotion is not going to happen unless enough people start demanding and encouraging different habits. In this next section, two plausible methods are discussed. While the first option focuses on immediate solutions to the tough environmental influences, the second option evaluates the ways to change community values and create a larger and longer-lasting impact.

I. Cost and Inconvenience

Many people deter away from healthy habits because of the environmental factors of being costly and inconvenient. For example, a salad from the organic company SweetGreen typically costs 12 dollars. On the other hand, junk food always seems to be extremely convenient and cheap. A bag of chips, in contrast, costs a dollar and can always be found in vending machines. These factors alone can detract away from self-efficacy making it both harder to initiate and maintain the change of living more healthfully. Moreover, over time, behavioral responses, such as the loss of money, may also start discouraging the individual from maintaining a change. The most effective way to solve this problem is to have companies decrease the price of healthy foods and increase the price of junk foods. However, this solution is close to impossible at the moment. *America just loves junk food too much.* Therefore, for now it is best to emphasize the concept of home-cooked meals and other strategies, such as carrying around a snack, to combat these negative environmental factors. With the right mindset, a good level of self-efficacy, and the right behavioral factors, these obstacles *can* be conquered.

II. *Community Values and Events*

Speaking on a larger scale, community is a huge environmental factor that helps determine the health of constituents. It is much harder to live healthily if the rest of the community is constantly promoting the opposite. Thus, it is essential to change those negative values. Monumental changes in a community's values have occurred in the past. Veganism used to be perceived as an impossible diet all over the country. However, today, the state of California seems to always be associated with being vegan. One article in the *New York Times* claimed that "the surging popularity of plant-based diets is drastically changing the dining landscape [of Southern California]" (Gordiner, 2012). More and more vegan restaurants are opening in order to satisfy people's needs. Today, becoming vegan in California is not as hard as it was 20 years ago. There are so many available resources and alternative foods that it seems veganism has almost become the norm in southern California.

The same shift in values can happen on a smaller scale as well. A study done by Meyerowitz and Chaiken found that public health campaigns can "foster adoption of healthful practices to the extent that they raise beliefs in personal efficacy" (Bandura, 1977). Thus, people who are passionate about eating healthy should create community-based events so that friends, family, and even strangers can all work together towards a similar goal. For example, setting up a booth at a Relay for Life that promotes cancer preventative measures may potentially help shift the community's values towards healthier habits. Having more community events such as Relay for Life will also help establish the ultimate goal of making "eating healthy" be the new social norm. Despite the fact that a change in social norm requires an exorbitant amount of effort and time, if enough people in the community are willing to change and demand healthier foods, it will become very plausible. Like veganism in California, more and more "healthy" restaurants can potentially start opening up (if the demand is met), making access to healthy foods become much easier and also simultaneously alleviating some of these environmental obstacles (inconvenience of food). Sometime in the future, let us hope that eating healthy will become as "cool" and popular as ordering pizza.

Conclusion.

People all over the country know that many of their habits are detrimental to their health and yet still actively choose to not to make any changes. Their lack of action can be attributed to several personal, behavioral, and environmental factors prohibiting them from changing. However, utilizing the right methods and having the right mindset will make this journey much easier. But what happens after one's ultimate goal is met? Firstly, new goals can constantly be set. There is always room for health improvement. However, even more importantly, successful individuals need to also start encouraging others to change. By spreading encouragement and promoting the right habits, anyone can live clean, vigorous, and healthy lives. Let us hope that the next viral trend can be ten-days-of-clean-eating challenges rather than ten-thousand-calorie challenges.

References

- Bandura, A. (1977). Bandura / Health Promotion Health Promotion by Social Cognitive Means. *ARTICLE Health Education & Behavior*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198104263660>
- D'Orazio, J., Jarrett, S., Amaro-Ortiz, A., & Scott, T. (2013). UV radiation and the skin. *International Journal of Molecular Sciences*, *14*(6), 12222–48. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijms140612222>
- Furrukh, M. (2013). Tobacco Smoking and Lung Cancer: Perception-changing facts. *Sultan Qaboos University Medical Journal*, *13*(3), 345–58. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23984018>
- Gordiner, J. (2012). Vegan Food Is in Mainstream in Southern California - The New York Times. Retrieved May 8, 2017, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/26/dining/vegan-food-is-in-mainstream-in-southern-california.html>
- Narayanan, D. L., Saladi, R. N., & Fox, J. L. (2010). Review: Ultraviolet radiation and skin cancer. *International Journal of Dermatology*, *49*(9), 978–986. <https://doi.org/10.1111/J.1365-4632.2010.04474.X>
- Rosenstock, I. M., Strecher, V. J., & Becker, M. H. (1988). Social Learning Theory and the Health Belief Model. *Health Education & Behavior*, *15*(2), 175–183. <https://doi.org/10.1177/109019818801500203>
- Social and Behavioral Theories 1. Learning Objectives. (n.d.). *Behavior & Social Sciences Research*. Retrieved from <https://obssr.od.nih.gov/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Social-and-Behavioral-Theories.pdf>
- van Leer, E., Hapner, E. R., & Connor, N. P. (2008). Transtheoretical model of health behavior change applied to voice therapy. *Journal of Voice : Official Journal of the Voice Foundation*, *22*(6), 688–98. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvoice.2007.01.011>