

Principle 3:

There's a Difference between Knowing and Doing

Amongst the people who spend their days worrying about the social problems posed by the obesity epidemic, there's a segment who believe that education is going to be the key to our eventual salvation. In fact, well-meaning people often point to a lack of education as the root cause of many issues and undesirable behaviours.

The refrain is usually, "If only people knew, if only they had all the facts," then they wouldn't:

- Vote for duplicitous politicians;
- Support policies that are contrary to their own self-interests;
- Believe in/be sceptical of global warming, and
- Cram their faces full of fattening food.

I suppose this is an optimistic viewpoint because it hypothesizes that ignorance (as opposed to apathy or stupidity) is the root of most negative behaviours. This suggests that once the "informational deficit" is corrected then the behaviour will correct itself in turn. Unfortunately, the hard truth is that humans are not completely rational beings and we do stupid things all the time despite knowing better.

For proof of this, you may wish to think back to some scenarios from your time in college or university. I'll provide a couple sample situations to get you thinking. We'll use the Choose Your Own Adventure format.

Scenario #1

You have to be at an 8 a.m. class coming up tomorrow morning that is usually tough sledding. Do you...

- A) Go to bed early and get a good night's sleep.
- B) Stay up until 2 a.m. playing a Trivial Pursuit drinking game.

Scenario #2

You have a term paper that is worth 40 per cent of your final mark that you haven't started and is due in two days. Should you...

- A) Start working on the paper.
- B) Spend the next 12 hours building up your Orc army in *World of Warcraft*.

Scenario #3

You are sitting in a lecture about an abstruse and difficult topic, one that will be covered extensively on the final exam. Do you...

- A) Take notes.
- B) Continue staring off blankly into space.

How did YOU choose? Hey, there's no judgement here. Some of those so-called "bad" decisions from the past are probably the basis for many great stories today. They may also explain why you are unemployable.

The point is much of the time we *already know what we should be doing*. We know that we shouldn't gamble, smoke, do drugs, drink to excess, serve cheese with fish, or wear jogging pants to the mall. We know that we should exercise more, eat better, floss daily, spend less than we earn, and work on the quarterly financial report instead of reading Wikipedia entries for all 35 seasons of *Doctor Who*.

But knowing and doing are different beasts entirely, and a lot of times we will do things contrary to what we "know" we should be doing, sometimes even contrary to what we intend to do. We can do this for reasons that are at times understandable and other times completely inscrutable and irrational.

Education will not be a panacea

I am going to go way, way, way out on a limb here and suggest that most North Americans who have persevered and made it past Grade 5 in their educational studies know enough about food and exercise to live more healthily than they generally do. Consider yourself; you might not know all the ins and outs of thermogenesis or how the body converts glucose to glycogen but you probably "intuitively" understand things like:

- Water has fewer calories than a milk shake
- Exercise is important and has many benefits
- A piece of fruit is a healthier snack than a bag of marshmallows

I won't totally discount the possibility that some people are genuinely incredulous that donuts have no redeeming nutritional value or that there could be a correlation between eating 14 cheeseburgers a week and wearing size 60 pants. For the most part though, these reactions result more from wishful thinking or willful blindness than from lack of knowledge. We may not always understand the scope of how good or bad different foods are, but we know which ones are broadly good and which ones aren't.

Now to be sure, it's always better to have more knowledge than less. Plenty of shady marketing practices have positioned certain food products as being healthier than they actually are, or having supposed "health benefits" that are based on shaky research. So there is a definite need for consumers to have some judgement and discernment.

But I think that for most of us, the fundamentals are already there. I'd hazard to say that we have a relatively good understanding of things like food and nutrition; it's ourselves and our actions we find hard to comprehend. And this is at the root of our often-fraught relationship with eating.

Between idea and action falls the shadow

Have you ever watched daytime talk shows? For the uninitiated, these are programs created by networks to fill time between advertisements for career colleges, trial lawyers, and pawnshops that pay cash for gold.

Most of these shows exist to deliver pure *schadenfreude* to their audiences. They foster up a parade of people from the lower social strata and feed them to the proverbial lions. Episodes are built around the hackneyed clichés of the genre: paternity tests; polygraphs to establish infidelity; juvenile delinquents who need to be scared straight; feuding trailer park residents and so forth.

Every once in a while, you'll see a show where the production team is gathering clips for the annual demo reel they send to the daytime Emmy voters. You know this is happening when they have a "serious" episode that focuses on interventions for guests who have major problems, like drug use or involvement in prostitution.

Inevitably, at some point the host will earnestly recount all of the calamities that the vice in question – say using heroin – has wrought on the featured guest. "So you lost your job, lost your house, ruined your marriage and became estranged from your children – all from using heroin. Now as all this was happening to you didn't you ever think: Gee, maybe I should stop using heroin?"

In response to this stunning insight, the live studio audience will dutifully clap their flippers, bark, and receive some fresh herring from the production assistants as a reward. However, those viewing at home may have a different reaction. Something like, "Yeah Captain Obvious, I'm sure they did think of that – probably many, many, times."

The problem for a junkie on the *Steve Wilkos Show* isn't that they don't realize that quitting heroin might improve their lot. They almost certainly know that. The issue is that they can't, don't know how to, or have already tried to but failed. They know where they need to be. Getting there is the problem.

The trouble for many of us who have lifestyle issues, like managing money, weight, or gingivitis is that often the solutions seem so simple. Spend less than you earn. Eat fewer calories than you expend. Floss your teeth. The difficulty we have isn't that we are too dumb to grasp these answers. If anything, our relative intelligence makes things harder for us.

Think of yourself and all your abilities. You may know how to program active server pages or explain a complicated philosophy like existentialism. You might be able to read music and play an instrument like a virtuoso. Maybe you know how to leverage synergy across vertically integrated operating units – because according to some job descriptions that's a skill. You can do difficult, challenging, things that not just anyone can do, yet you can't stop your bank account from sliding into overdraft each month. You don't exercise enough or eat the right foods. You don't stick a piece of dental floss between your gums with regularity.

What can happen if we know the solution to a problem we would like to solve, realize it seems simple, but still aren't doing it? We can develop the idea that the fault must lie with us, with our character. We look into a mirror labelled "willpower" and see ourselves as wanting.

It's not all about willpower

I can resist anything except temptation

- OSCAR WILDE

I noted earlier that we often go about improving our lifestyle as though we were trying to put a spaceship or satellite into orbit. And if our bodies are the payload, then willpower is our favourite rocket fuel.

Many of us are still trapped in the Victorian Age, especially when we think about weight. That is to say, we conceive of our problems with weight as a *moral struggle* between our craven physical impulses and our higher-order intellectual processes. The belief is that the weak-willed give in to temptation and the strong-willed resist it. And as in the actual Victorian Age, this line of thought produces a lot of stupid reasoning and unfair judgements.

If you're thin or at least hovering around what might be considered normal weight then society allows you a perch of superiority to look down on others who are heftier than you are. Anyone fatter than you are must be weaker than you are. In our more honest moments, most of us can probably identify times when we've engaged in this ugly strain of thinking.

Anybody with a passing interest in psychology probably realizes that we're winding around to a concept called the Fundamental Attribution Error. This is when we attribute our successes to our internal characteristics and our failures to external causes beyond our control. The truth is usually much muddier than that.

As I've said before, thin and healthy are not perfectly overlapping states of being. There are outwardly healthy-looking people who appear the way they do in spite of their diet and lifestyle, not because of it. But most will be happy to claim they are more disciplined than a health-conscious overweight person is.

Unfortunately, many of us, including those who are struggling, accept this bilge without question. And helping to perpetuate the myth is a surprising demographic: people who have succeeded in losing significant amounts weight.

I don't know what hell is like. If it does exist, I imagine the only thing in their DVD library is the complete series of *Space: 1999*. I also believe that in my personal hell, a substantial part of each day is spent listening to formerly overweight people talk about their dieting "war stories."

"Yes Gerry, tell me again about the time you ordered a walnut and arugula salad while everyone else got prime rib. I don't know how such an outstanding achievement wasn't recognized by congress."

Now of course not everyone who has lost weight is like this. Many are humble, some even self-deprecating. And most won't broadcast the idea that they lost weight through superior willpower, but a few will and more will allow (or at least not discourage) other people to make the case for them. And you can understand why, because losing weight is hard and most of us enjoy praise. If people believe that you achieved something rare through strength of character, why disabuse them?

The problem is, if you accept the idea that you are a better person now because you've lost weight it means you have to tacitly accept that you were a worse person before. This is a damaging fallacy, but many of us buy it. And those who aren't careful can find their whole sense of self-worth being bound up with numbers on a scale.

When weight is contextualized as a moral struggle, it turns the issue into a demolition derby where even the so-called "winners" end up damaged in hidden ways. If you are struggling, it is easy to internalize these false moralities and self-defeating beliefs. You may believe that you lack self-control or that you don't have the necessary willpower to change. If this describes you, then lean in close because I'm going to tell you a secret:

It isn't about willpower; it's about changing what feels normal. And to change your normal, you have to change who you are. You have to become the person who reaches for a glass of water instead of a soda.

Willpower alone can't always do this for you. You can't will yourself to hate something you love or to love something you hate. But you can adjust your habits and routines so that you avoid problematic behaviours and perform good ones more often.

Now with that said, it is necessary for us to be able to exert a bit of willpower now and again. There will be times when you need to gather the resolve to say "no" to something tempting or grit your teeth and make a better choice. If you have a weakness for candy, and consistently roll out of the supermarket looking like you've been to a liquidation sale at Willy Wonka's factory, then you're always going to struggle.

The suggestion I've seen that I like the most in regards to willpower is to view it like a muscle. With exercise, it can become stronger. Rely on it too much and you'll exhaust it.

Parting Words

We're still in the philosophical section of the book, but when we get to the practical advice parts that come later about food, exercise and lifestyle, you may find that many of the suggestions aren't going to dazzle you with their newness. I don't think its revolutionary for me to encourage you to eat more vegetables, or to drink water instead of hummingbird nectar.

These are the sorts of messages that all of us have absorbed by osmosis in recent years. It would be easy to glance at them and say, "nothing new here." Maybe so, but the million dollar question is, how many of these things are you actually doing?

I'm guessing the answer is likely "some" but a long way from "all." Hey, I'm the same way, and I wrote this thing. So that's why, as often as I can, when I offer recommendations I have tried to include steps to illustrate how you can put them into action, to try bridge the divide between knowing and doing.