

Power Over Habit: Why Mindset Matters

If you have ever tried to ignore a box of doughnuts at work, you know how hard it is to keep your hands to yourself and walk on by. And once you walk on by, the battle isn't over. Even if you are in a different room and down the hall, you can't stop thinking about those doughnuts.

Why is it so hard to resist something as small and seemingly innocent as a doughnut? It has to do with habit—and mind set.

Hardwired habits

The draw you feel from that doughnut goes way beyond just a mild interest: **you are wired to want it, and resistance is hard.** In his book, *The End of Overeating*, Dr. David Kessler MD explains the breakdown:

When you taste foods that are highly palatable (such as foods containing excess sugar, fat and salt), your brain releases opioids into your blood stream. Opioids are brain chemicals that cause you to have intense feelings of reward and pleasure, as well as relieving pain and stress. The pleasurable effect is similar to the feelings that morphine and heroin users experience. The desire may be so intense that you keep taking one bite after another: it can be hard to stop.

That explains why you keep eating. **But why do you give in and approach that doughnut box in the first place?** Why not just refuse to take that first bite?

The answer is another brain chemical called dopamine. Dopamine is responsible for motivating you to seek out the doughnut so you can get the opioid release. You remember how good it tasted and how great it made you feel. Dopamine energizes you to work for that doughnut. It causes you to concentrate on it and drives you to seek it out.

Once this process happens a few times, the whole cycle becomes a habit that is very reward focused, very ingrained and very hard to break. Your brain's circuitry has become mapped and wired to want the doughnut. And you don't even have to be near the doughnut for this process to start--the dopamine can kick in even when there are no doughnuts in site: ever made a run to the store for a treat that you just had to have right then?

The result

Over one-third of all adults in our country are obese. We live in a society in which we are surrounded by highly-palatable foods (think restaurant foods and processed foods). The deeply ingrained habit of eating unhealthy food and too much of it is widespread. Everywhere we turn we are bombarded not only with unhealthy food, but also with a neural circuitry that drives us to pursue that unhealthy food.

Remap your brain with mindset

And now the good news: *you can start right now to change the trajectory that you are on.* You can rewire your brain and begin reducing the power that those opioid-producing foods have over

you. **You can draw a new map in your mind that will have you passing by the doughnuts on your way to better pleasures.**

The secret is mindset. You must want something else more than you want those fleeting moments of pleasure that the doughnuts bring you. What is it? What do you want? Maybe you want to drop a couple of jeans sizes. Maybe you want to be off your blood pressure medication. Maybe you want to be known as an 'athletic' type person. Maybe you want to keep disease at bay. Or maybe you just want the immense satisfaction of being in control of yourself! **People who can't resist a doughnut have given away power over their own lives!**

Once you know what you want, go after it with the following strategies:

- 1. Stop.** There is no other way to say this: you must stop eating foods that are not in your plan. In the beginning, this will be difficult. When everyone around you is tossing back pizza and soft drinks, you will struggle. You will smell the pizza, you will be in the emotionally charged atmosphere and dopamine will be flowing in your bloodstream. Think about what you want more than that doughnut; think about what you can only have by resisting the doughnut. Sheer will-power is what you have to use at this point.
- 2. Savor the victory.** Once you come out on the other side having successfully won the battle within your own mind, you will have accomplished much more than just saying no to a piece of pizza. *You will have begun 'cooling' the stimulus*, as Dr. Kessler puts it. You have taken the first step toward weakening the circuitry in your brain that drives you to habitual patterns of behavior. The next time, it will be easier. And after that, even easier.
- 3. Focus on new rewards.** As you remap your brain, you are creating new neural pathways that in time will be stronger than the weakening, "doughnut-centered" pathways. Make sure these new rewards are life-giving and energy-producing, such as the thrill you get when you can run a 5K or set a PR in your weight-lifting.

You can have power over habits: it's all about mindset. You can do this!



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