

Why Do Behavior Interventions Fail? Insights from Behavioral Economics

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Why do so many behavior change interventions fail? Why do our New Year resolutions (such as losing weight, regular exercise, stopping smoking) so often end in disappointment (the 三日坊主 phenomenon)? In this lecture I will introduce concepts from the field of behavioral sciences (behavioral economics, neuro-sciences and psychology) to explain the nature of human behavior and decision-making. I will describe how new ideas from these fields have been applied toward improving interventions to boost the success of behavioral change.

There are two important reasons why our behavioral intentions do not reliably align with our behaviors. The first is that many (perhaps most) behaviors skip or bypass conscious intentions; they are instead automatic or habitual, or swayed by momentary influences such as emotions. Secondly, even when we do form an intention to perform a behavior (such as starting a healthy diet), we often fail to follow up on that intention (“Not today—I’ll start tomorrow”). Our intentions are often unreliable; moreover, they are systematically and predictably unreliable as the temporal interval increases between when we form an intention to the moment we confront the actual behavioral choice. In the jargon of behavioral economics, our preferences are not stable or dynamically consistent. I will discuss each of these problems and how an understanding of these problems can be used to design interventions.