



Tweak a little CHANGE A LOT

You'd be surprised at the big differences little changes can make to your mindset – and your life, says Flic Everett

FOR AS LONG AS I CAN REMEMBER, MY bedroom has been a shameful tip of dropped clothes, strewn make-up and half-read magazines. I've never tackled it properly, as I assumed it would require a personality transplant and six months of wardrobe-reconstruction to create my fantasy rainbow of tissue-wrapped cashmere and Perspex shoe boxes.

But after my husband nearly broke his ankle on an abandoned stiletto, it occurred to me that spending just five minutes tidying up every time I went in the bedroom would be manageable. It required me to act against my naturally messy inclination, but wasn't a massive behavioural change. And to my amazement, the bedroom has now remained pristine for over three months. It turned out, five minutes a day was enough to stop the chaos building up. I've since extended my five-minute rule to the bathroom and kitchen, and the house is tidier than it's ever been.

It's brought home to me what a huge impact even small changes can have on our lives and happiness.

'It's easy to assume that change can only arise from a sweeping behavioural overhaul,' says psychotherapist Fiona Arrigo. 'In fact, challenging the way we "always" do things, by acting against type in small ways, can have a much more profound effect.'

This is the science behind the 'nudge theory', from Chicago-based professor Richard Thaler, which suggests that people can be imperceptibly nudged into making healthier choices – a behavioural science breakthrough that's currently being taken very seriously by the US and UK governments.

Because, increasingly, research shows that making just minor changes that challenge your natural inclinations can be hugely successful when it comes to forming positive, long-term habits. Acting Against Type (AAT) may mean that instead of your routine mid-afternoon muffin, you'll have a bag of dried fruit and nuts – and gradually notice you're not experiencing the usual post-sugar-rush slump. Or, rather than your usual white-shirt-and- >>

trousers work uniform, you might wear a print dress to the office, and enjoy the self-esteem boost you get from stepping out of your style comfort zone.

'If you set yourself some huge goal, it can be too overwhelming to even begin,' explains life coach Piers Thurston (feelhappynow.co.uk). 'Breaking changes down into small, manageable steps makes it far more likely that your habits will alter long-term.'

ONE STUDY FOUND THAT AFTER A SEVERE dieting regime, 86% of women failed to keep the weight off. And according to research from the University of Hertfordshire, over the course of a two-week resolution, only 30% of women managed to maintain their planned changes in behaviour. Study leader Professor Richard Wiseman, author of *59 Seconds: Think A Little, Change A Lot* (Pan, £8.99), said, 'People try to do too much too soon and don't seek the right support.'

It figures that if you love cake and crisps, suddenly replacing all treats with quinoa and linseed is doomed to failure. But swapping Mini Cheddars for a pack of almonds, or having a go with the kids' Wii Fit is a much smaller behavioural shift.

'You can't do everything quickly,' agrees life coach Rebekah Fensome (rebekahfensomelifecoach.com). 'People tend to be unrealistic about their goals, which leads to demotivation and feelings of failure – an unhealthy cycle to get into.'

Instead, AAT simply means challenging your automatic, unthinking habits. 'Take small actions to challenge yourself to do things differently,' advises Piers Thurston. 'Whether that's finding a new way to work or even buttering your toast from right to left – all these small things can painlessly get us into the mindset of breaking old habits.'

It may seem minor, but giving yourself regular micro-challenges can make a huge difference: for example, buying ingredients for a meal you've never cooked before; sitting down to talk to your partner over breakfast, instead of standing over the sink with your cereal; or dragging your best mate to a gallery, rather than your usual Pizza

Express. All these little shifts can unblock the path towards much bigger changes in the way you communicate, eat or socialise.

'I'm desperate for new clients, but my morning work routine was always to check Facebook, then read the celeb gossip,' says Lorna Hilliard, 37, a self-employed writer. 'But, recently, I've made a conscious effort to post my blog updates on a business networking site, first thing in the morning. I've had some encouraging feedback and a possible job offer, and all it took was a slight change of focus.'

'Most of us have too much going on in life to change the big things,' agrees Fiona Arrigo. 'Doing things more softly is better for us all round than setting big, difficult goals that can lead to failure, and trigger our inner critic.'

AAT changes are just enough to challenge our assumptions about how we 'always' do things. If you're hoping to lose weight, improve your relationship, or even get a new job, you won't make progress until you start to subtly shift the status quo.

'Fear is the biggest factor that stops us making changes,' says Piers Thurston. 'We're afraid that once we take the handbrake off, we won't be able to stop. Once that belief is broken, we realise that making changes isn't as hard, time-consuming or scary as we once thought.'

'I hate the gym, but was feeling really depressed about my body,' says Lydia Cook, 40, an HR manager from York. 'In France this summer, we walked a lot with the kids, and when I got home, I started walking in the woods near my house. That one small change has made me think about eating more healthily, and raised my self-esteem. And now, I'm thinking about getting a dog.'

When it comes to improved body image, forget the '10 years younger' makeover or a three-stone target weight loss. A change as small as choosing the right foundation can alter how you feel about yourself. 'Women generally don't have the confidence to undergo huge makeovers,' agrees colour counsellor Jules Standish, author of *How Not To Wear Black* (O Books, £7.99). 'Gradual improvements can be far more effective. Women who wear a lot of black or grey can often make themselves look years younger and healthier simply by adding small amounts of colour through bright accessories.'

Throwing on that shocking pink scarf may be acting against type, but who knows what that small decision could lead to? Because, as I discovered with my newly neat house, the joy of making one tiny change is that it can painlessly evolve into something much bigger – without you even noticing. ■



If you *always*...

...WEAR BLACK

Add a bright necklace or a patterned scarf – you don't have to start dressing like an Indian bedspread; just one pop of colour can lift your look and your mood.

...STAY IN ON SUNDAYS

Do something low-key like the cinema (it's quieter than usual on Sunday evenings), or meet a friend for an early supper, to shake up your weekend routine. It'll boost your energy for Monday morning and you'll start the working week with good memories of the night before.

...TURN THE CAR RADIO ON

Try the school run without it and have a conversation with the kids, instead. Studies show older kids are more likely to open up in the car, and no radio shows you're listening to them.

...SHOVE MESS INTO A CUPBOARD

Spend 10 spare minutes tidying it out and putting things back where they belong. Next 10 minutes you have, do the kitchen drawers. Satisfaction guaranteed.

Breaking changes down into small steps makes it far more likely you'll succeed long-term'