Using Data to Hack My Habits and Whip Up My Willpower

Show-and-Tell Session
Quantified Self Conference
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The Experiment

Starting Point (2007)

- Age: 57
- Diet: typical American
- Weight: 190 lb / 86 kg
- Activity: sedentary
- Workouts: zero
My 4-Step Approach

1. Learn
2. Model
3. Track
4. Hack
Learn

The Willpower Instinct
Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D.

The Power of Habit
Charles Duhigg

Younger Next Year
Chris Crowley & Henry S. Lodge, M.D.
Model: My Brain
(Oversimplified, But It Works for Me)

PRIMITIVE Loop

- Found in all animals
- Short-term rewards
- Unconscious habits
- “I want that NOW”
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ADVANCED Loop
- Sophisticated, humans only
  - Long-term goals
  - Conscious, willpower
  - “Pause and plan”

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Self-Tracking:
Increasing my awareness of unconscious habits and their effects
Model: Self-Hacking

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Self-Tracking: Increasing my awareness of unconscious habits and their effects

Self-Hacking: Using knowledge and willpower to create / hack into those habits
Habit 1: Nutrition / Weight

Low-fat diet + Basic Tracking

- Initial success
- Gradual backslide
- Tracking drop-off

#FAIL
Habit 1: Nutrition / Weight

Hacks:
• Enhanced data visualization
• Go 100% vegan -- no fuzzy rules
• Use willpower upstream – at the grocery store, not the table

Result:
• Within target zone
• Stable >18 months

#wØØt
Habit 2: Activity

A Hack to Make ‘Seat Time’ More Active

Hacked seat
Split keyboard in arms
Knees free to move

Attached mini-elliptical exerciser
Habit 2: Activity
A Hack to Make ‘Seat Time’ More Active

- Hacked seat
  - Split keyboard in arms
  - Knees free to move
- Real-time red/yellow/green feedback light
- All data captured in self-tracking database
- Attached mini-elliptical exerciser
Habit 2: Activity
Habit 2: Activity

Result:
- 70,000 steps/wk
Habit 3: Strength Training

Perform strength training after aerobic exercise + Basic Tracking

- Initial success
- Backslide after 3 months
- Compliance poor: most weeks, I skipped 1 or 2 of the 3 desired sessions

#FAIL
Habit 3: Strength Training

**Hacks:**
- Same 3 days every week
- Early AM (highest willpower)
- Eat 1 orange before workout (rising glucose increases willpower)
- Eat breakfast after session (reward)

**Result:**
- Increased strength
- 96% compliance

#wØØt
## Experimental Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nutrition / Weight</strong></td>
<td>Unhealthy American diet; 190 lb / 86 kg</td>
<td>100% plant-based diet; 147 lb / 67 kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Activity</strong></td>
<td>Sedentary</td>
<td>5 miles / 8 km daily average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strength</strong></td>
<td>Zero workouts</td>
<td>3 workouts/wk 96% compliance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Life-long habits can be changed!
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Learn some science, but beware of its limitations.
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Make a mental model of willpower and habit mechanisms.
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Make a mental model of willpower and habit mechanisms.

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Keep iterating through track-hack cycles.
Thanks for listening!

Questions and Discussion

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