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HABIT FORMING

By Mary Ellen Ternes



Mary Ellen Ternes

Who likes change? Not me! Well, okay – after enough time to adapt, usually in hindsight, I’m generally a happy advocate of positive change. But effecting even positive change is tough, as in “day after day, grindingly difficult, too tired to think about it anymore” tough. It’s the process of change that’s so difficult. That’s why change – even necessary, positive and life-enhancing change – is something we tend to take very seriously.

This resistance to change in the area of sustainability is studied in a relatively new area of focus called “adaptation,” used here as a reference to the process of adapting to conservation measures intended to achieve greater sustainability. It’s an area that is getting a lot of study lately, as we try to find ways to enhance energy efficiency.

One contributor is my *alma mater*, Vanderbilt University, through its new Institute for Energy and Environment

(VIEE). The Institute has pulled together scholars in various disciplines to study this necessarily interdisciplinary area, including natural and social sciences, law, business, humanities and engineering. Recently, the Institute contributed to a study evaluating our behavioral approaches at home (called “behavioral wedges,” borrowing from Princeton University’s “stabilization wedges”) in a paper entitled “Household Actions Can Provide a Behavioral Wedge to Rapidly Reduce U.S. Carbon Emissions.”

The study identified and analyzed seventeen types of household action that can reduce energy consumption using available technology with low to zero cost or good returns on the investment. The study included an analysis of “plasticity” – i.e., the percentage of folks who weren’t previously supporters but ended up being persuaded. This “plasticity” factor introduces a “behavioral realism” to the study that

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differs from studies based solely on engineering or economics (rather like my boys' chances of success in turning my "No" into "Ok, ok").

The study concluded that with "intervention" (essentially persuasive marketing), the five types of behaviorally relevant activities (weatherization and upgrades, equipment efficiency investments, equipment maintenance, equipment adjustments and daily use behaviors), can significantly reduce carbon emissions. Most interesting to me is the summary chart, in order of behavioral plasticity, that compares potential emissions reductions from each activity. According to this summary, most people would weatherize and upgrade equipment and use more efficient equipment. About half would purchase a fuel-efficient vehicle. It also shows that the lowest plasticity scores (and thus the hardest behaviors to adopt) are for those daily behaviors, such as driving, line-drying clothes, thermostat reduction and carpooling. Don't feel guilty, it's just difficult.

The American Psychology Association even formed a task force to analyze why we won't change. The task force said numerous psychological barriers are to blame, including uncertainty, mistrust, denial, undervaluing risks, lack of control and habit. The APA also concluded that habit "may be one of the most important obstacles."

I think it's helpful to recognize this inherent difficulty in changing habits. Appreciating this up front might help us avoid adopting unrealistic and possibly self-defeating expectations. I also think the pervasive nature of the habits we're talking about makes the prospect even more challenging. For example, every day we're learning that to conserve water and energy, we need to turn off the water and lights when we're not using them, adjust our thermostat, and find a more efficient route to work. Sounds simple, right? Except that, on any typical day, your morning thoughts might stumble to the point of distraction: "Don't forget to turn the water off while brushing. How long has the closet light been on? Should I leave some lights on in the house during the day, and which ones, and what happened to that timer I was going to get? What about the thermostat – does letting the house cool during the day use more energy to warm it up when I get home? Do I lose more energy with the blinds open than the sunlight adds with heating? What route should I take to work? Why aren't I carpooling? Why am I going into the office anyway? Can't I work from home some days? Now I'm too tired to think about it." And you haven't even gotten to work yet. The whole process can become paralyzing.

So, how do we adopt a new routine and still get to work on time? Everybody's different, but isn't it like diet and exercise, and any other habit we think might improve our lives? Before you start, think about it. Educate yourself. Learn what works for others, like your friends and neighbors. Develop your own plan that works for you, not anyone else – this is not a competition, and different people have different issues in their lives that affect their choices, if choices are even available. Practice it mentally – visualize, visualize and visualize some more. Expect to revise your plan as needed, and keep at it. It will get easier. Happy New Year! ■

Mary Ellen Ternes, Esq. is a former chemical engineer from both the EPA and industry. She is currently a shareholder with McAfee & Taft and co-chair with Richard A. Riggs, Esq. of its Renewable and Sustainable Energy Group, and is serving a three-year term as City of Nichols Hills Environment, Health and Sustainability Commissioner.

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Check out Vanderbilt University's new Institute for Energy and Environment at www.vanderbilt.edu/viee

Read the VIEE's recent article, "Household Actions Can Provide a Behavioral Wedge to Rapidly Reduce U.S. Carbon Emissions," at www.pnas.org/content/early/2009/10/23/0908738106.full.pdf+html

Learn about Princeton's Wedge Game at cmi.princeton.edu/wedges

For a detailed review of psychological issues associated with adaptation, see the American Psychology Association's "Psychology and Global Climate Change" at www.apa.org/science/climate-change

Find friends and neighbors with The City of Nichols Hills Environment, Health and Sustainability Commission www.nicholshills.net/CCBIndex.asp?CCBID=19

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