



Episode 29: How to Build a New Habit More Easily

Welcome to In the Right Direction podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host, Deb Elbaum, and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness, one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone, it's Deb. Here's my question to you today: What's a new habit that you're trying to build? How's it going?

Life about growing and learning. We all have new habits of body, mind, or spirit that we're working toward. Maybe you're wanting to start meditating every morning, or maybe you want to be more compassionate with yourself and others, or maybe you're wanting to put away your phone and be more present with your family.

Building a new habit can take effort. New thoughts and behaviors are represented as new brain pathways, and it takes energy for the brain to build these new pathways. That's because the brain likes to conserve the body's energy budget, which means that by default, we just fall back into old patterns.

The good news is that there are strategies you can use to make building a new habit easier on you and your brain. Today, we are going to talk about one of those brain-friendly strategies to help you build new thoughts and behaviors in a way that sticks.

The strategy we're talking about today is a language strategy. It is creating and using an affirmation. Now, if I say the word affirmation, I'm guessing your brain might go to a few places. Maybe it thought about that old Saturday Night Live skit, where the character Stuart Smalley shared some of his affirmations as he gazed at himself in the mirror. Or maybe the word affirmation makes you think about a religious or spiritual connotation.

If you have a preconceived notion about affirmations, I invite you to set them aside for the next few minutes and be in an open, curious mindset, instead, as we talk about what I mean by affirmations and how you can use them.

An affirmation is a brain and energy tool. It is a way to align your words, energy, and intention to let the universe know what you want, what's important to you, and what you want to create for yourself.

I want to illustrate the power of an affirmation by telling you about one of my clients. She is a healthcare leader who frequently speaks in public – by leading meetings, giving talks, or speaking on panels. This leader is incredibly bright, confident, and purposeful. She knows what her message is, and she feels confident sharing it with the world. Yet, she had a habit of speaking that was getting in her way. She would say “sort of” as a filler phrase, the way some people would say “um.” Like, I sort of think this is way to go. I sort of think this is how it is. It was noticeable in our coaching, and I gently asked her if she was aware that she said sort of a lot. After I pointed it out, she said, that's so interesting, as she had received the same feedback recently from a colleague. As with most habits, she herself was not aware of how often she was saying sort of. Now, once she was aware of and hearing herself speak this way, she wanted to stop.

She was ready to build a new speaking habit and get rid of that filler phrase. She wanted to simply be able to share her ideas clearly and confidently.

In that coaching session, we talked about affirmations and how they might help her. I'll explain them to you like I explained them to her, and then I'll return to her story to share her amazing transformation.

Affirmations are statements or phrases that are comprised of words that convey what we want, how we want to feel, what we want to move toward, and who we want to be. Here's the secret: it's actually not the specific words that are most important in an affirmation; it's the energy behind the words. Words have energy, and the statement we choose is a container for that focused energy. This combination of words and energy makes a powerful tool that tells our brain, hey brain, this is important. This matters to me, and I want this. Our affirmation is a message to the universe that provides a guide and roadmap toward the specific goal we want.

The words you choose for your affirmation can be short and sweet, or longer. They can be broad or focused. To see if an affirmation is right for you, you have to say it out loud and see how it feels.

Let's take an example. Suppose you want to build a new habit of putting your phone away to be more present with your family. You could start with a statement like: I can create space to connect with my family.

The next step is to say it out loud, and see how it feels in your body. Our body is a powerful barometer of our truth. Listening to your body's response will tell you if this statement is working for you or not. The way to tell if an affirmation feels right, is to say it out loud like you mean it, and then see how your body feels. If it's a hell, yeah! then we coaches call that resonance – meaning it resonates with your brain, body, and energy. Your goal is to find an affirmation that's resonant.

On the other hand, if you say, I can create space to connect with my family, and you're not feeling it, it doesn't mean you can't build this new habit, it just means that you have to play around with the wording to find an affirmation that works. You might try instead something like: Being present with my family brings me joy...or, I can set boundaries between work and life. See how they're slightly different and have a different emphasis?

After you find an affirmation that feels resonant for you, the next step is to say it out loud or write it down. A lot. That's how you teach your brain to make its new neural pathway representing the new thought or behavior.

Let's get back to my client I was telling you about, the one who wanted to eliminate the "sort ofs" from her vocabulary because this verbal habit was undermining her leadership presence.

We talked through some potential affirmations. Here's the one she chose:

I speak concisely and clearly. Short and sweet! I speak concisely and clearly. When she said it, she even sounded concise, and she loved that. She was excited to practice her new affirmation.

Our next coaching session was 2 weeks later. We started talking, and immediately I noticed a huge difference in how she spoke. There were no "sort ofs". Not only were they completely gone, she was also getting to her point much more quickly. Her confidence and competence shone through her language.

It was awesome! When I asked her if she noticed, she said yes and that her team members have also remarked on her transformation. She said that she's been doing her affirmation all the time, over and over, especially when she was driving to and from work. She was really proud of herself, and most of all pleased that the way she was showing up reflected her confidence and abilities.

That's the power of an affirmation!

Let's bring this to you. In the next few weeks, help your brain build a new habit that's important to you. First, decide what it is you want for yourself. Get clear on what you want to start, stop, or create. Next, put together a statement or phrase that feels resonant in your body and carries positive energy. Try out a few different ways to say it, so that you find the statement that's most resonant for you.

And here's a trick. If you have an affirmation that almost feels true, but a part of you is still doubtful, try this. Put the phrase "even if I don't completely believe it yet" at the end, like in parentheses. Sometimes, just adding that phrase is enough for the brain to relax and accept an affirmation that you really want to work on.

Lastly, say your affirmation out loud – to yourself and even to your friends, family, and colleagues. Let everyone and the universe know which new thoughts and behaviors you're ready to build.

The more you use your affirmation, the more it will help you.

Thank you so much for listening and being part of my community. I would love to hear the affirmation you create. Email me at deb@debelbaum.com and share it with me. And please reach out if you need support building new thoughts or behaviors. I'm here to help you create your best self at home and at work, to keep moving in the right direction for you.

Until next time!