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Context to the nugget

BJ speaks about the importance of language when we think about habits. He says that breaking habits is possibly a wrong metaphor where we could end up doing more damage than good if we adopt that mindset. He likens a bad habit to a tangled phone cord that needs to be carefully untangled knot by knot for us to really resolve the situation. He proposes a similar approach to dealing with bad habits rather than going after them aggressively.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And moving to maybe breaking free from bad habits you also use the back to also being specific about language, you mentioned that breaking a habit is possibly not the right language and I am tangling it is more like it. What is the nuance the way you see it BJ?

BJ Fogg (BJ): I am so glad you are asking all these questions about terminology. It really... it's... maybe I'll just do an academic paper just on this, the language around behaviour changes held us back and this word break bad habits has been one of the problems because break implies that if you put a lot of force in at one moment, like breaking a stick it'll be done. So, a lot of force, a lot of energy in one moment is how you solve it. That's not how these kinds of habits get solved. It's not about a one-time thing that gets people to stop gambling or stop drinking or stop gaming or whatever the addiction is or whatever the bad habit is. So, I am proposing and explaining how a better word is untangle unwanted habits and that then implies a process just like if you think of your phone headset all tangled up. Wow, it looks overwhelming, you are not going to solve it just by yanking on it in one moment but you know that if you take the easiest angle not the hardest and undo that and then go to the next easiest one that you'll get there. Same thing with these things that we call bad habits. They tend to be things... snacking is a pretty easy example to use. So, if you have a... you consider bad habit of eating bad foods is a snack, it's not just one thing, it's probably there's a snack in the morning, there's snack at lunch, snack driving home, snack in the evening, snack at 3 a.m. So, it's a tangle that we call a habit but really, it's all these habits connected together. And so, you take the easiest snacking habit to stop, the easiest one not the hardest one and you design that out of your life and then you go to the next one and the next one. And so, I think untangling really sets the expectation much better that it's a process and really maps very well to how you look at a tangled rope or a phone headset. At first it's overwhelming and you are like, oh my gosh, but then as you get started you see it starts resolving and then pretty soon it comes completely clear, it untangles and so I think that's right on for how many of these unwanted habits work.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This nugget from BJ reminds me of the movie Martian Directed by Ridley Scott and starring Matt Damon. In the movie, Matt Damon's character ends up getting stranded on Mars and he battles a near death situation to slowly treat himself, establish connect with Earth, figures out a language of communication, solves multiple problems to find himself back on the earth. In the concluding scene of the movie, Matt Damon is addressing a few young graduates at the NASA and he says the only option you have is to keep moving and solve one problem at a time. That is you're only shot at staying alive and coming home.

I guess there is a similar point to be made here. Lot of people treat breaking habits as a one-off dramatic event but I guess it is much more organic and slow burn than we think it is. One of the tactical things BJ suggests in the book is that we break down the bad habit into minor behaviours that show up in our lives. Then we start going after them one tiny hill at a time and slowly work on untangling the habit.

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End of nugget transcription

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BJ Fogg - Nuggets

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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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