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Context to the conversation

Katy refers to the song “Spoonful of sugar makes the medicine goes down” and speaks about how kids naturally warm up to the notion of doing something that seems like fun but adults sometimes don’t appreciate it enough. She goes on to say how we could think about combining activities to ensure that we increase the odds of doing it.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And moving along, Katy, in the book, I also loved your reference to the Mary Poppins song, Spoonful of Sugar makes the medicine go down. We, as a family, are a big fan of Julie Andrews, who is not I guess but we love to...

Katy Milkman (KM): She is very lovable.

DJ: ...love to sing songs and sound of music as a family. And you say that there are often interesting bundling opportunities that we could consider to get boring task done, could you talk about the insight here, especially, you know, maybe as a parent of an eleven year old and a seven year old? I am curious, you know, how should we think about bundling for ourselves but also in terms of making this relevant for children?

KM: Yeah, no, it is a wonderful question and the reason I talk about Mary Poppins actually is funnily enough given the way you ask that question. I think we do intuitively understand that to get things done with kids, and that is why the song rings so true, you have to make things fun, they would not just do chores because they know it is good for them in the long run like or eat their broccoli because you tell them they will live longer or make their bed because you say like good people are neat and tidy, there has to be an element of fun. Kids do not understand that delayed gratification, those long-term goals that they are striving towards in a way that at least some adults can. But what is interesting is that research suggests we as adults assume, even though we get this about kids, we assume that we do not have the same challenges that once we set our mind on a big goal that is distant that we should be able to just do it, as Nike would say, and sort of work towards that. And research shows that is actually not right. So there is work by Ayelet Fishbach and Kaitlin Woolley, Ayelet at the University of Chicago, Kaitlin at Cornell, showing that people misunderstand their ability to just push through a difficult task. When they need to get some big goal done, most people will choose the most efficient route to success and only a small subset of people will try to find a way to make the goal pursuit enjoyable in the moment. But people actually will do better and persist longer if they are encouraged to look for a fun way to pursue their goals. So to give you a really concrete example, if you are trying to exercise more regularly, the more effective route might be using the StairMaster to get yourself in shape. But a more fun way would be to go to Zumba classes

with a friend and you will persist longer if you actually do it the more fun way. But most people think, I just have a goal, I want to be in shape, let me use the most effective route and then they quit. So we get that, we need to make it fun for kids, we do not appreciate we need to make it fun for ourselves but the same rules apply to adults. We are not very good at delaying gratification, we overweigh the instant experience and under-weigh the long-term benefits. We just do not know that about ourselves, the way we know it about kids. I think this insight is really important to all aspects of behavior change but you mentioned temptation bundling and that is actually a specific tool that I have studied that builds on this insight. It is funny because the research happened in the reverse order. I did the research on temptation bundling and later this work by Kaitlin and Ayelet pulled together the key insight that really is the heart of temptation bundling that we need to make things fun or we would not do them, but temptation bundling is really a technique for that. I have studied it. The basic tool is, if you want to make something more fun or in order to make it more fun and alluring and likely that you will do it and not delay gratification, you link whatever feels like a chore with something instantly gratifying and only let yourself have that instant gratification while you are doing the chore. So in the domain of exercise where I just gave you another example, you could think about, you know, only let yourself binge watch your favorite TV show on Netflix while you are exercising at the gym. That would be a temptation bundle, you have linked something tempting with work, the workout with a chore, so now doing the chore actually is something you look forward to because you want to get that tempting stimulus. Time may fly while you are doing the chore because it is linked with something fun and you would not feel guilt about the indulgence after the fact, like, oh, I should have been doing something more valuable with my time because you only did it while you were accomplishing your goal or getting your chore done. So you could only listen your favorite podcast while doing household chores or making fresh meals, only let yourself have a snack you crave while you are doing your taxes or if you are in school, while you are studying or catching up on emails for work that you might not enjoy, there is all these different ways you can temptation bundle and it converts something that you would normally delay and put off and not persist on into something you actually look forward to and so get done.

DJ: And there actually, as I read your book, I felt there was an interesting nuance around the zero one element of it in the sense, make that sugar, if I may use the term, available just for that time when you are doing the chore and lock it up otherwise.

KM: Yeah, exactly, that is exactly right.

DJ: It is not so much more of it but actually absolutely none of it otherwise, if that makes sense.

KM: That is right, right, exactly. Yeah, I think that is really important because if it is just, you can binge watch your favorite Netflix show any time including at the gym, now it is not a hook, but if you are only allowed to do it at the gym, now you start craving trips of the gym to find out what happens next. So that is really key, sort of, linking them to each other. So it is an if and only if treat.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: When COVID hit around Mid March 2020, and when we went into the full lockdown, our staff that helped us with some chores around the home stopped coming. I recognize that this sort of a thing is a luxury in a country like India or Singapore. As we thought of divvying up the BJP, which is Bartan Jhaado and Pocha as they say in hindi, my wife took the B and JP was added to my Job Description. I still remember my first few days where I felt that the 1-2 hours spent in doing that was a big time sink. Then it dawned on me that may be I could use the time to listen to some of the

music I like or the podcasts I like to learn from like the Knowledge Project or the Tim Ferriss show. Once, I brought that shift, it completely changed my attitude towards getting the task done.

To the extent that now slowly we are opening up and the staff are back, I am finding that I am not learning as much and my exposure to new ideas is being throttled.

I don't want to romanticize the point Katy is making but I do think there is power in thoughtful matching of activities for us to get win-wins out of situations.

The other piece I have learnt about habit formation is that we should never try and fight will-power. We are better off thinking about the environment and ensuring that what we want to do is in the path of least resistance.

James Clear, the Author of Atomic Habits, who was earlier at the podcast, speaks about it here.

JC: "So, basically you want to make the good habit the path of least resistance. As an example, I have one reader, he would practice guitar and when he would come back from his guitar session, put the guitar in a case and put in the closet and so he just wouldn't see it for like a week and maybe forget to practice. But so, his new habit became I'll take my guitar, put it on the stand in the middle of the living room, pass it all the time, it's right there, it's very obvious, it's also frictionless to just pick it up and play for 5 minutes. So, now he practices all the time because it is highly visible. You can also increase the friction of a task. So, for example, if you want to watch less TV you could take the batteries off the remote control so you have to get up to turn it on manually or you could unplug the TV after each use and only plug it back in if you can say the name of the show that you want to watch. So, it's now you know you can just mindlessly turn on and find something. And those are examples of kind of increasing the friction or reducing the friction associated with a habit and the lower the friction is the more convenient it is, the more likely a habit will be performed and the higher the friction is, the more inconvenient it is, the less likely you are going to fall into that habit."

DJ: Thank you for listening. For more, please visit playtopotential.com

End of nugget transcription

Nugget from James Clear that is referenced: [Environment and habits](#).

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Katy Milkman - Nuggets

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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock the 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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