

## The Challenging Path to Change

The first hour of our walking tour in the Costa Rican rainforest is lovely, just as the guidebooks promised. We marvel at the lush tropical plants and try to spot the camouflaged creatures surrounding us. The light filters through the thick canopy and vines upon vines climb every tree. The sounds of birds and howler monkeys fill the air. Venturing across dramatic suspension bridges, we take in the stunning vistas and watch for movement on the forest floor below.

An hour before, ten of us spilled out of our van, eager to stretch our legs after the long morning drive from the coast, north and inland to Arenal's Hanging Bridges. Our extended family gathered in Costa Rica to celebrate my father's 81st birthday.

As we walk through the park, our naturalist guide narrates our surroundings. You can imagine the kids' delight when the guide gathers us around to peer into the hole where the park's host tarantula lives. "Go for it," I offer, stepping back decisively, thinking to myself, "No way!" I'm squeamish about creepy-crawly things so I have no intention of putting my face near the door of the tarantula's hidey-hole.

I probably have my brother to thank for this. When we were kids, he was the classic pesky little brother—I don't

remember, but he might've tossed a spider into my hair, relishing my shriek. Now nearly 50 years old, my brother is a professional mountain man. He lives in upstate Montana, owns a mountaineering store and is comfortable and capable in the wild. I, on the other hand, am an uptight city slicker. We grew up in Washington D.C., and then I moved to Chicago before settling in Denver. My laidback brother used to accuse me of being a control freak, and I must confess he's right. A manicured English garden is more my cup of tea than the Costa Rican rainforest. Yet Arenal is dramatically more beautiful than anywhere I've ever been. So here we are, my brother and I, gathered with our families around the tarantula's hole. I slow my breathing, trying to relax.

At this point on the nature tour, my father's right there with us. He's vigorous for his age. He lifts weights, swims regularly and in his late 60s, he completed a triathlon and won first place, because he was the only entrant in his age group. This 1.9-mile nature walk seems manageable to him. But while the experience of the Hanging Bridges Park is described as "walking on air," as though you float from one scenic overlook to the next, what isn't mentioned is the steepness of the paths going down and up sizable hills between the park's fifteen bridges.

We had arrived by mid-afternoon when light could fight its way through the thick foliage. As we come to the early intersection where the "accessible" trail peels off for a shorter walk, my father pauses but decides to stay with the group to explore the full trail. I walk with him up and down the slippery hills. The paths are mostly well maintained, often

with handrails, but as we trudge up and down and up and down, he becomes fatigued and begins to slow down. I stay back with him, admiring the flowers and birds. Our group stretches out as the kids excitedly explore ahead.

By now, we're several hours into our hike and my father is really struggling. With nowhere to sit to restore his strength, he's lumbering forward, one exhausted step at a time. Twilight is creeping in and, it seems to me, so are the critters. The animals are getting noisier as dusk descends, and most of the park guests have departed. My skin crawls as I imagine what might drop out of the trees and onto my head.

Suddenly my twelve-year-old nephew stops short and points, "Snake!" I glance ahead in the dim light and see what looks to me like a stick on the path. But when the naturalist shines his flashlight nearby, it moves. My heart lurches. Eyes wide, I hold my breath. The guide uses a green laser light, moving it ahead of the snake in short strokes, pretending to be prey, hoping to coax it off the trail. The snake follows the light and slithers into the underbrush.

My anxiety surges, and I want to run. I cannot get out of there fast enough, but we have another half-mile to go and must stay together. My father is taking one slow step at a time, gripping the handrail. I stay by his side. As our group inches along, I ask the guide what kind of snake it was. "Fer-de-lance," he answers without elaboration. I try to calm myself, remembering how small it was. When I look it up online that evening, my breath quickens again at the description: "The fer-de-lance is considered the most dangerous snake in Costa Rica, irritable and fast moving, a highly venomous pit viper."

Never before have I been so relieved, as we stumble out of the now-dark forest, into the shuttered park entrance and the otherwise empty parking lot. My father has valiantly dragged himself to the finish line after three hours of walking steep hills. We collapse into the safety of our waiting van.



Usually, I get to be the guide, leading people through their uncharted emotional territory using a map I know well. Over the past 30 years, in my work as a clinical psychologist, I've helped hundreds of people on their journeys to lasting change. Together, we've contended with threatening predators, including suicidal depression, trauma, addiction and anxiety. My clients have realized their hopes of becoming better partners, parents, friends and professionals. Using science-based solutions, I've taught them how to build self-care routines, to develop effective communication and conflict skills, to manage and tolerate their emotions and to be more compassionate with themselves and others. My clients have turned around their mental and physical health, saved their marriages and become more productive at work. As a guide, I've oriented folks to the path, helped them avoid pitfalls, encouraged them at each step and celebrated with them as their lives have flourished.

I am also a fellow traveler. Like my father during our Costa Rican trek, I have endured life challenges that left me so weary, I wasn't sure I could take another step. But with encouragement and guidance, I staggered onward and found the way to live

my best intentions. These experiences, while grueling, are also my life's most triumphant moments, and I look back and feel proud. I've worked to understand myself, find contentment and become a better spouse, parent, friend and professional.

Drawing from what I've learned from my own journey as well as by guiding others, I have spent years developing a new path for you. The workers at Arenal Hanging Bridges Park cleared a trail through the rainforest, laying down paving stones one at a time and building bridges and handrails. Similarly, I have laid out a road for you by examining the research on behavior change and applying these ideas in my clinical work and in my own life.<sup>1</sup> In the upcoming pages, I will share with you the Action-Ability Approach, my step-by-step process for transforming hope into habit.

I have traveled this trail myself countless times. I know the ups and downs, the dangers and the places to hold on. Throughout this book, I will share with you examples from my life when I've used the Action-Ability Approach to create lasting change for my own health, relationships and work.

I haven't found a way to make this experience feel "like floating on air." The hills on the journey to change will be steep at points, and sometimes your footing will seem unsure. You will probably get tired. But I will be by your side for every step. I'll make sure there's plenty of daylight, and I've built benches along the way so you can restore your energy.

I promise the changes you create for yourself will be worth your perseverance on this journey! Your dreams of a healthier, happier, more fulfilling life are possible when you learn how to take charge of your actions.

How do you want your life to change? Maybe you're trying to exercise regularly, manage your finances better or stop procrastinating. You realize you could feel more energetic, financially secure or successful, and you're motivated to change. Or maybe you've received an ultimatum from your boss, your spouse or your doctor that your actions need to change or else. You've heard their feedback that you ought to stop smoking, be more attentive at home or be more effective at work. You're scared to lose your job, your marriage or your life.

You *want* to change. You've probably even tried before. You have the right intention, yet it's challenging to stay on track. You're not alone. Most people make resolutions that go by the wayside within days. Usually, people come back to their good intention again and again but are unable to maintain lasting change. As W.C. Fields joked of his attempts to quit drinking, "It's easy. I've done it a thousand times."<sup>2</sup> Making a different choice a few times might be simple, but how do we really change for good?

Creating lasting change requires you to develop healthy new habits. Living your best intentions is easy once you've done the work to make the action habitual, because then it's self-sustaining. The Action-Ability Approach illuminates the path to changing unwanted habits into new healthy habits.

*Habits are at the root of both the struggles and the successes of our lives.* Our unhealthy habits cause suffering for us and our loved ones, and our healthy habits set us up for success in work, love and play.

The distinction between healthy and unhealthy habits isn't always as clear as it might seem. For example, exercising

regularly might be healthy, but we can exercise excessively to avoid our anxiety and can even create a health risk by pushing ourselves too hard. Being highly productive might be a healthy habit, or we might overwork to avoid the strain in our relationship rather than addressing it. Being off task might be an unhealthy habit, or it can be an act of self-care to rest regularly.

Creating habits is easy because *our brains are habit-formation machines*. When we repeat a behavior over and over, our brain cells communicate with each other and develop cellular pathways that enable the action to happen automatically. The problem is unhealthy habits are easier to create than healthy ones. Our unhealthy actions don't require as much effort to repeat and are often immediately and/or intensely rewarded, motivating us to do them again. By contrast, healthy actions have distant rewards and require effort to repeat, so they are less likely to get the repetitions that form the brain pathways and create a habit.

Habits happen. The question is: Will you choose your habits or will your habits choose you?

I am here to show you how to take charge of your life by *owning* your habits.



Our resolutions for healthy habits are like tadpoles. Frogs, like the ones teeming in the Costa Rican rainforest, lay hundreds of eggs, resulting in countless little tadpoles. But most tadpoles die before becoming baby frogs, and many of

these froglets don't make it to adulthood. Predators and lack of nourishment cull the young frogs, and only the few luckiest and strongest survive to adulthood.

Similarly, not every good intention becomes a habit. In fact, very few do. Most ideas for change die in the resolution phase or shortly thereafter. We feel inspired to better ourselves. "I will eat healthier." "I'll be more patient with my children." "I'm going to stop gambling." We make a resolution with sincerity, but within hours or days, our old habits resurface and we give up on our good intention, returning to our usual patterns.

When we learn to carefully consider our resolution tadpoles, select the most important ones and create a supportive habitat, we are much more likely to live our best intentions.

## **The Stages of Habit Development**

The lifespan of a habit has four stages.<sup>3</sup> Stage 1 is the Resolution Phase. Typically, we just grab hold of a change idea and declare our intention to act without giving our resolution any thought. This is a setup for failure. In Part I of this book, I will teach you solutions for choosing and incubating your hopes to protect them from the predators that otherwise pick off your good intentions. By learning how to manage the resolution selection process in Part I, you will ensure your resolution is hearty and strong—fit for action.

Stage 2 is Preparation, where we transition our resolution from a thought to a behavior. Usually, resolutions die from lack of preparation. We declare our intention and spring into

action, feeling passionate about the goal. Like a tadpole sprouting legs, our idea is on the move. We resist the shopping spree, the donut or the argument. We get up early to go to the gym or get right to work. But usually this surge of action fizzles out when we get distracted or discouraged. As motivation wanes, old habits kick back in and resolve falters. In Part II of this book, you will learn how to improve your resolution survival rate by devoting your preparation to setting up a nourishing and protective habitat for your new behavior. Part II explores the Preparation Phase for creating lasting change, where you will discover how to prepare your mind, relationships and environment for change.

Stage 3, the Sustained Action Phase, can be the most difficult to get through. If a resolution even makes it this far, it usually dies here. But using the Action-Ability Approach, you've prepared a nourishing ecosystem to strengthen your resolve and you've removed predators to protect your behavior change. You stay with your commitment, repeating your behavior over and over, avoiding resolution predators, including distraction, craving, anxiety, boredom and lapses. Even so, every successful behavior change falters along the way, but now you will succeed because the mindset you developed in the Preparation Phase will enable you to regroup quickly and return to the intention again and again. In Part III, I will teach you resolution first aid so that when your new behavior takes a hit, you will know how to patch it up and return to sustained action.

Once your resolution has fully matured, it's on autopilot in Stage 4, the Habit Phase. You've done countless repetitions

of your desired behavior during the Sustained Action Phase, which established new networks in your brain so your behavior happens with less effort and thought. The Habit Phase is the reward we craved when we declared our hopeful intention.

This book is a science-based guide explaining the Action-Ability Approach for how to raise a new behavior from a fledgling resolution to an adult habit. We will explore each developmental stage and identify the pitfalls and predators as well as phase-specific solutions for survival. Once you understand how to protect and nourish your change ideas, you will have a process for transforming your hope into healthy habits.



The Action-Ability Approach  
Stages of Habit Development

The saying goes: Knowledge is power. But here's the truth: Knowledge is potential—*implementation* is power.<sup>4</sup> By harnessing the Action-Ability Approach, you will turn the potential of your ideas into lasting change. When you transform what you know into action, the power to live your best life is unleashed.

## **Chapter Recap**

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- ◆ Lasting change requires us to create healthy new habits.
- ◆ The brain is a habit-formation machine. Will you choose your habits, or will your habits choose you?
- ◆ When we repeat a behavior over and over, our brain cells communicate with each other and develop cellular pathways that enable the action to happen automatically.
- ◆ This book describes the Action-Ability Approach, which will empower you to take charge of your life by owning your habits.
- ◆ The Action-Ability Approach is a step-by-step process for lasting change, moving through four phases from Resolution through Preparation and Sustained Action to Habit.

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## **Key Words**

Action-Ability Approach, Resolution, Preparation, Sustained Action, Habit