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187 — Friday Fix: Can You Change Someone Else?

Welcome to The Verywell Mind Podcast! I’m Amy Morin, editor-in-chief of Verywell Mind. I’m also a psychotherapist and a best-selling author of four books on mental strength.

You’re listening to The Friday Fix! Every Friday, I share a quick mental strength strategy that can help fix the thoughts, feelings, and actions that can hold you back in life.

And the fun part is we record the show from a sailboat in the Florida Keys!

Now let’s dive into today’s episode!

You’ve probably heard people say that you can’t change anyone else. And while I agree you can’t force someone to change, I’m also a firm believer that you have the power to create change in your relationship.

The closer you are to someone, the more influence you have. So while you can’t make your partner stop smoking and you can’t force your parents to start taking better care of their health, there’s a good chance you might be able to have a positive influence on them if you go about things from a different angle.

Before we talk about what works to promote change, let’s talk about what doesn’t work.
When we want someone to change, our natural tendency is to point out their behavior and explain why we think they should do things differently. But this approach usually backfires.

Think about it from your perspective for a minute. When was the last time you changed one of your habits because someone pointed it out to you and expressed not liking what you’re doing? Probably never.

Imagine a vegetarian walks up to someone eating a hamburger and says, “Meat is really bad for you and it’s bad for the environment. You shouldn’t eat it.” What are the chances the person is going to say, “You know, I never thought about that. Thanks for letting me know,” as they vow to never eat meat again?

Strangely though, we sometimes expect that approach to work. You might lecture your adult child about their spending habits or you might caution your friend that their keto diet is bad for their health. But you know what happens when you tell someone not to do something? They’re brain gets flooded with all the reasons why they should do it—so they can defend against you.

We all do that. We go on the defense and argue against what we hear.

And we believe the words coming out of our own mouths more than the words coming out of someone else’s mouth. So our beliefs actually get reinforced when we argue our case.

Imagine this scenario. Let’s say someone smokes cigarettes. Their partner says, “You really need to quit. Smoking is bad for you.” The person who smokes says, “I’m too stressed to quit. Smoking relaxes me.” With that one quick exchange, they’re not thinking about all the reasons why smoking is bad, instead, they’re focusing on how much they get out of smoking—which in this case, is they feel it helps them manage stress better. Inside their own minds, they end up focusing even more on the benefits they get from smoking and they might be even less likely to quit than ever!
We often assume someone’s bad habits stem from a lack of knowledge. So we think educating them will convince them to change.

But that’s not how things work. We all know certain things are bad for us and we do it anyway. So skip the temptation to lecture someone about their behavior.

Also, beware of the tendency to give an ultimatum. You might think you’re helping by telling a loved one to choose between you or their bad habits, but that rarely works. More times than not, most of us have trouble following through with our threats when the other person doesn’t do what we want them to do. So of course, you can set boundaries, but don’t try to get someone to change based on an ultimatum from you.

Alright, so those are the things that don’t work. Now let’s talk about what can work to influence someone to change.

The most important thing you can do is change your behavior. The closer you are to the other person, the greater the chance that you’ll have an influence on them. Think of it like a dance. When you change your dance steps, the other person will change theirs.

Here’s how you influence someone else:

Change your behavior first. I work with a lot of people in my therapy office who want their partners to change. Here’s an example: one woman was upset that her boyfriend always stopped at the bar on his way home from work to hang out with his friends. He came home late almost every night. She’d usually spend the whole night texting him to hurry up and get home. And when he did get home, she yelled at him for being inconsiderate. She wanted him to come home after work and get things done around the house and she wanted to eat dinner together. So we looked at her current response—texting incessantly and yelling at him when he got home. And we talked about whether those things made him more or less likely to want to come home right after work. She came to the conclusion that she was deterring him from coming home. Who wants to come home to someone screaming at them? If she wanted to encourage him to come home earlier she had to change her behavior. Treating him with kindness was the key to encouraging him to come home earlier. She stopped sending multiple
angry texts when he didn't come home. And when he did arrive home, she stayed calm and acted kind. Rather than yell at him, she'd say "It's so nice to see you." Slowly, over time, he started coming home earlier.

But this is a great example of how you can positively reinforce the behaviors you want to see more of. Give positive attention to the things someone is doing well.

On the flipside, don't give attention to behavior you think needs changing. Here's another example from my therapy office. I worked with a young woman whose mother spent a lot of time complaining about her ex-husband, who was the father of my client. My client had told her mom many times she didn't want to listen to her saying bad things about her dad all the time. But her mother kept calling just to say things like, "Your father is such an idiot. Listen to what he did now." Eventually, my client decided that rather than keep telling her mother to stop, she was going to change her response. From that day forward, whenever her mom started to complain about her dad, she exited the conversation. She'd say something like, "Oh mom, I gotta run. I'll talk to you later." It only took a few times of her ending the conversation, that her mother stopped complaining to her about her dad.

Sometimes, you might choose to ignore a behavior you dislike. At other times, you might walk out of the room and withdraw your attention or end a conversation.

So those are the two things you can do. Give positive attention to healthy behaviors. Give less attention to unhealthy behaviors.

Keep in mind that influencing someone isn't the same as manipulating them. Manipulation involves things like guilt trips or using someone's insecurities against them.

Influencing someone is just about reinforcing healthy behaviors and not reinforcing unhealthy behaviors. It's also about changing your behavior—and seeing how that change might influence the other person to do things differently.
Ultimately you can’t force someone else to change. But, you likely do hold a lot of influence and changing your behavior might have a positive effect on someone else.

So the next time you’re tempted to accidentally reinforce a behavior by nagging, lecturing, or offering unsolicited advice, remind yourself that there are better ways to take action. Look for ways to encourage healthy behavior and strategies that might deter unhealthy behavior.

If you know someone who could benefit from hearing this message, share it with them. Simply sharing a link to this episode could help someone feel better and grow stronger!

Do you want free access to my online course? It’s called “10 Mental Strength Exercises That Will Help You Reach Your Greatest Potential.” To get your free pass, all you have to do is leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or Spotify. Then, send us a screenshot of your review. Our email address is podcast@verywell.com. We’ll reply with your all-access pass to the course.

Thank you for hanging out with me today and listening to The Verywell Mind Podcast!

And as always, a big thank you to my show’s producer (who does occasionally remind me of my unhealthy habits), Nick Valentin.