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Why We Resist the Changes We Want

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Abstract

A change can feel straightforward when we're planning it and much harder when it's time to act. Research shows that changes in people's intentions can be greater than changes in their behaviour [22]. This article explores how familiar habits, uncertainty, anticipated loss, social expectations and practical barriers can make it difficult to follow through. Everyday examples show how emotional awareness can help us understand the moment we return to a response we'd like to change. The article also considers how personal choice, previous experiences and support from others affect the process. It includes a brief mindfulness practice, exercises from cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and rational emotive behaviour therapy (REBT), and a reflection and mental rehearsal exercise. A seven-day experiment invites readers to observe one recurring pattern and try a different response.

Keywords: resistance to change, behavior change, emotional awareness, habits, mindfulness, cognitive behavioral therapy, rational emotive behavior therapy

Introduction:

Have you ever decided to change something about yourself, felt sure you were ready, and then found yourself doing exactly what you'd promised yourself you would stop doing?

Perhaps you wanted to spend less time overthinking, speak up when something bothered you, or take a step towards an opportunity you cared about. You knew what you wanted to do and why it mattered. Then the moment came, and you told yourself you'd try again when you felt more confident or when the timing was better. The next time you found yourself in a similar situation, you fell back into the same pattern.

Imagine a close friend has cancelled your plans at the last minute twice this month. Each time, you've said, "Don't worry about it," even though you'd set aside the evening and felt disappointed. When it happens again, you decide to tell her how you feel. But when she calls and asks, "Are you upset with me?" you hear yourself say, "No, it's fine."

The gap between knowing and doing

It can be frustrating to understand why you keep doing something and still find it hard to change. Understanding helps you recognise a problem. Awareness helps you see when it tends to happen. A decision gives you a direction. When the situation comes up again, though, you're also dealing with what you feel, how you expect others to react, and how you've become used to responding. A meta-analysis found that interventions produced larger changes in people's intentions than in their behaviour [22].

Let's return to the friend who keeps cancelling plans at the last minute. Before the call, you've decided to tell her how disappointed you feel. But when she asks, "Are you upset with me?" you begin to worry about how she'll take your answer. She might feel criticised, or the conversation might become awkward. You hear yourself say, "It's fine."

Reassuring her eases your worry for the moment but leaves your disappointment unspoken. Noticing this helps you understand what gets in the way. You want to explain how you feel, yet your concern about upsetting her leads you to hold back. Next time, you might pause before answering and say, "I understand plans change, but I was disappointed because I'd set aside the evening." You may still feel uncomfortable, but you are giving yourself a chance to respond differently.

The problem may not be a lack of knowledge. In that situation, the familiar response may come more easily than the one you're trying to practise. Knowing what you want to change does not automatically make it easier to act when the moment arrives.

Sometimes the gap appears earlier: we keep preparing without trying what we've planned. Kleeberger (2021) [10] illustrates this through a story about repeatedly planning a journey that never takes place. In our own lives, preparation might mean rehearsing a conversation over and over while continuing to postpone it. It can help to ask, "Have I prepared enough to take the next step, and what would that step be?"

Why staying the same can feel easier

A familiar response is predictable. You know what to do and have some idea of what will happen next. Someone who's used to measuring their worth by how much they get done may want more time to rest. Yet when a free evening comes along, they check their emails or find one more thing to finish. Staying busy may ease the nagging feeling that they should be doing something useful.

Meera noticed a similar pattern at work. She'd been trying to leave by six, but she often stayed late when a request came in towards the end of the day. One evening, just as she was packing up, a colleague asked her to update a spreadsheet. Meera opened her laptop again and spent nearly an hour on it. The next morning, she learned it hadn't been needed until noon.

She'd assumed that leaving without doing the update would make her seem unhelpful. As soon as she started working on it, that worry eased. A few days later, another request arrived as she was about to leave. She reached for her laptop, then paused and asked, "When do you need it by?" The next afternoon was fine. She said she'd pick it up in the morning and left at six.

When we repeatedly respond the same way in a familiar situation, that response can become more automatic [23]. For Meera, starting the work immediately eased her worry about seeming unhelpful. Putting something off can also bring temporary relief from discomfort, even if the delay creates more pressure later [17]. If you keep returning to a response you'd like to change, ask yourself, What worry or discomfort does this response help me avoid in the moment?

Fransen and colleagues (2026) [7] identified 12 reasons why people resisted proposed changes. This included uncertainty, fear of being judged, doubts about their ability, the effort involved, concerns about having a choice, and doubts about whether the change would work. Different concerns mattered for different changes.

The study looked broadly at responses to proposed changes. You can use the questions below to explore what may be making it difficult to follow through on a change you want to make.

What might I lose? Even a change you want can mean giving up something you value. You may welcome a new job and still feel reluctant to leave colleagues you trust or work you know well. You might want fewer responsibilities but miss the sense of purpose that comes from being needed.

Fisher (2014) [6], writing about workplace change, describes concerns about losing status, relationships or a familiar sense of who we are. Similar worries can arise in everyday life. If you've always been the person others turn to for help, you may wonder, "Will they still value me if I'm not always available?" Recognising that concern helps explain why saying no can feel difficult, even when you need more time for yourself.

Do I believe I can manage it? You may want a new job but keep putting off the application because you're worried about the interview. You might think, "Will I be able to explain my experience clearly?" or "Is it worth applying when I might not be selected?" Doubts about ability and whether a change would work were among the reasons examined by Fransen and colleagues (2026) [7].

Try naming the part you feel unsure about. If it's answering interview questions, you could practise with someone you trust. If you don't know whether the role suits you, you could find out more before deciding. This helps you work out what information, preparation or support you need.

Does this change feel like my choice? Sometimes we try to change because others think we should. You might push yourself to attend more gatherings because family or friends say you need to socialise more. Yet what you really want is to spend time with someone you feel close to. Meeting a friend for tea may offer the connection you're looking for.

Concerns about personal choice and whether a change feels relevant also appeared in Fransen and colleagues' (2026) [7] research. Ask yourself, "What do I want from this change?" You may discover that the goal matters to you, but the way you've been trying to achieve it does not suit your needs.

What have previous attempts taught me to expect? If you raised a concern and were dismissed, you may worry that speaking up again will bring the same response. Guidance on workplace change recognises that earlier disappointments and broken trust can affect how people respond to new proposals [1, 3]. Kleinman (2025) [11] also encourages those introducing changes to listen to concerns and acknowledge previous experiences.

In your own situation, consider what would make another attempt more manageable. Would it help to choose a quieter time, have someone support you, or agree that you'll each have a chance to speak? What happened before deserves consideration as you decide how to proceed.

What around me makes this change harder? Our surroundings can continue to encourage the response we're trying to change. Meera's situation would be more difficult if her manager praised people for working late and criticised those who left on time. Asking about a deadline could help her clarify a request, but she might also need to discuss workload, priorities and expectations about availability.

Kanter (2012) [9] advises leaders to understand resistance before responding to it. Tanner (2025) [19], in professional guidance on organisational change, discusses how rewards, peer pressure and trust can influence people's responses. A study of 372 banking

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employees in Pakistan also found associations between organisational justice, organisational support, relationships with leaders and resistance to change [14].

These sources concern workplace change, so their findings should be understood in that setting. They also prompt a useful question when considering our own lives: "What support or agreement would make this change possible?" If your family expects you to be available whenever someone needs help, making time for yourself may involve discussing how to share responsibilities. Understanding what holds us back means considering both our own responses and the circumstances in which we are trying to change. These concerns can show up in ways that are easy to overlook. Sometimes putting something off looks a lot like working on it. You want to share your work with a wider audience, so you reread a finished piece and change a few sentences. The next day, you change them back. After several rounds, ask yourself what still needs attention. Does the ending need work, or are you waiting to feel sure that people will respond well? Research has linked procrastination with perfectionistic concerns, including worry about mistakes and negative evaluation [16].

You may also find yourself thinking through the same decision without getting any closer to making it. Reflection can be useful when it helps you understand a problem or identify what to do next; repetitive thinking can also become unhelpful [21]. Ask, "Is there something I still need to find out, or am I hoping to remove every possibility of getting this wrong?" That can help you decide whether to gather more information or make a choice with some uncertainty remaining.

Another pattern is repeatedly starting over. You begin a routine with enthusiasm, miss a few days when life gets busy, and look for a better plan. Before replacing it, consider what made it difficult to continue. A routine that worked during a quiet week may need adjusting when you have more demands on your time.

Waiting can also be reasonable. If you need a colleague's figures to finish a report, the delay may be necessary. You can still clarify when the figures will arrive and which parts you can draft meanwhile. Looking at the situation, this way helps you distinguish between a genuine obstacle and a familiar response that keeps you from moving forward.

What helps us follow through when willpower falls short?

When we fall back into an old habit, we often make ourselves a firmer promise. Next time, I'll stay calm. I'll speak up. I'll finish what I started. That promise expresses what we want to do differently. Following through also means working out what will help when the familiar situation returns.

Imagine you want to listen more openly to feedback. You've promised yourself you'll let the other person finish, but as soon as a colleague points out a problem with your work, you start explaining your decision. You could practise noticing the urge to interrupt and letting them finish before asking, "Could you show me which part you think needs work?" This gives you a specific response to practise when you'd usually begin defending yourself.

The COM-B model helps us consider three things that influence behaviour: **capability (C), opportunity (O) and motivation (M)**. Capability means having the knowledge, skills and physical or mental ability to act. Opportunity means having the time, resources and support that make the action possible. Motivation includes what we intend to do, along with the feelings and habits that influence our response. These factors work together to shape **behaviour (B)** [12].

Consider someone who wants to exercise regularly but works full-time and cares for an unwell parent. They know what kind of exercise suits them and want to get started. What they need is time when someone else can take over the care. Arranging for a family member to help on one evening could make a regular walk possible. Understanding what is missing helps them find a practical way forward.

Think about the last time your plan fell through. What would have helped you follow through at that moment? You might have needed more time, practical support or a smaller first step. You may also have felt worried, frustrated or overwhelmed without noticing how much that feeling influenced what you did. Recognising those feelings can help you understand what needs attention before you try again.

Emotional awareness and the feelings behind our behaviour

"I don't feel like doing it" can mean several things. You might be worried you'll get it wrong, irritated that another demand has landed on your plate, or tired after a long day. Recognising what you feel and using that information to guide your response is part of emotional intelligence [15].

Suppose you want your teenager to start making their own breakfast. You've shown them where everything is, but on school mornings you still step in as soon as they run late. When you notice how anxious you get watching the clock, you realise you're worried they'll leave without eating. You want them to learn to manage on their own, and you want to know they've had breakfast before they leave.

A Saturday morning might give you both more time. Your teenager can try making breakfast, and you can see which parts they manage and where they still need help. From there, you can work out together what would make it easier on a school day. Recognising your worry helps you see why you keep stepping in. You can then plan how to give your teenager more independence while addressing your concern about them leaving without breakfast.

Practical ways to work through what holds us back

A three-minute mindfulness practice

When you notice yourself delaying something you intended to do, take a moment to see what is going on. Are you worried, frustrated or unsure where to begin? This brief practice gives you space to notice your thoughts and feelings before choosing your next step. There is no need to force yourself to feel calm or work out a solution during these three minutes.

Spend about a minute on each step. This practice is adapted from the University of Minnesota's three-minute breathing space [20].

1. **Notice what's happening.** Sit comfortably. What's going through your mind? What feelings or physical sensations do you notice? If you feel an urge to pick up your phone or do something else, notice that too, without judging yourself.
2. **Focus on your breathing.** Feel the breath moving in and out at its natural pace. When your mind wanders, gently bring your attention back to breathing. There's no need to make your mind quiet.
3. **Focus on body sensations.** Widen your attention to your body. Notice your feet against the floor or your body resting on the chair. If focusing on your breath feels uncomfortable, rest

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your attention on these sensations or the sounds around you instead.

Suppose you sit down to sort a pile of papers but reach for your phone before you begin. Taking this pause may help you realise that you feel overwhelmed because you don't know where to start. Rather than tackle everything at once, you decide to remove the papers you can recycle. Recognising what was making you hesitate helps you choose a manageable first step.

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)

Sometimes we put off a change because we expect it to be difficult, uncomfortable or unsuccessful. We may accept that expectation without checking how well it fits the situation. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) helps us notice the connections between what we think, how we feel and what we do.

A thought record is one way to do this. It helps us write down what happened, identify the thought that influenced our response, and look at the evidence for and against it. The aim is to find a realistic perspective that helps us decide what to do next. The exercise below adapts the NHS thought record and adds a small action to try [13].

Suppose you want to walk regularly but keep putting it off after work. You come home tired, think, "A walk will only make me more exhausted," and settle on the sofa. Rest brings relief, but the routine you wanted to develop never gets started. Here is how you could explore that situation.

1. **Describe the situation.** "I planned to walk after work, but I felt tired when I got home."
2. **Write down the thought.** "If I go for a walk, I'll feel even more exhausted."
3. **Notice your feelings and response.** "I felt discouraged, stayed on the sofa and felt relieved that I didn't have to go out."
4. **Check the evidence.** "Long walks have sometimes tired me out. But on other evenings, a short walk has helped me unwind. I don't yet know how a short walk would feel today."
5. **Write a more balanced thought.** "I'm tired, so a long walk may be too much. If I feel well enough, I could try five minutes and see how I feel."
6. **Try it and review.** After the walk, note whether you feel more tired, about the same or more refreshed. Use that experience to decide whether the length and timing suit you.

In this situation, the thought record helps you recognise that expecting to feel worse has been influencing your decision to stay in. Trying a shorter walk gives you a chance to check that expectation while respecting your need for rest. You might find that five minutes is manageable, or that walking before work suits you better.

Once you find an option that suits you, make the plan specific. For example, "After I get home and change, I'll walk for five minutes." Linking an action to a particular situation can help us follow through [8].

Rational emotive behaviour therapy (REBT)

Sometimes we hold back because a disappointing outcome feels like a judgement about who we are. The belief "I must succeed, or I'm a failure" can make it difficult to face mistakes or learn from feedback.

Rational emotive behaviour therapy (REBT), developed by Albert Ellis, is part of the CBT family and helps us question beliefs about how we or others must behave, including what we tell ourselves when those expectations aren't met [5]. Research on REBT has found benefits across several psychological outcomes, although results varied across studies [4].

Suppose you want to do better in your exams, but after receiving a low mark, you put the paper away without reading the teacher's comments. You tell yourself, "I must do well. If I don't, I'm a failure." That belief makes it harder to review your mistakes and learn from them. REBT's ABCDE framework offers a way to question this belief and consider a different response [5].

1. **A — Activating event: What happened?** "I received a lower exam mark than I expected."
2. **B — Belief: What did I tell myself?** "I must do well in every exam. If I don't, I'm a failure."
3. **C — Consequences: How did I feel and respond?** "I felt ashamed and put the paper away. I wanted to improve but avoided reading the feedback."
4. **D — Dispute: How can I question this belief?** "Doing well matters to me, but does that mean I must succeed every time? Does one low mark make me a failure as a person? What could I learn by reading the comments?"
5. **E — Effective new belief: What could I believe instead?** "I want to do well, but I won't always get the result I hope for. This mark doesn't define me. I can use the feedback to understand what needs more practice."

Put this new belief into practice by reading the comments on one question and choosing one thing to work on. You may still feel disappointed, but you can begin using the feedback to help you improve.

A reflection and mental rehearsal exercise

Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) is an approach to communication and personal development based on proposed links between language, experience and learned behaviour. These links should not be treated as established scientific explanations. A systematic review found little evidence that NLP improves health outcomes and noted limitations in the available studies [18].

Some practices associated with NLP involve questioning general statements about ourselves and imagining a different response. These practices are also used outside NLP. Here, the purpose is to recognise what makes us hesitate and prepare one step we can try. The following activity uses reflection and mental rehearsal; it is not presented as a proven NLP treatment.

Suppose you've wanted to join a beginners' drawing class for some time. You enjoy sketching at home, but when you see other students' work online, you think, "I've never been good at drawing," and close the registration page. You still want to learn, yet each time you consider joining, the same thought stops you.

Try working through that moment:

1. **Write down what happened.** "I looked at the class page, compared my drawings with the examples and decided mine weren't good enough."

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2. **Identify what worried you.** "I was afraid the other students would judge my work." This is more specific than "I'm not good at drawing" and gives you a concern you can explore.
3. **Question what you assumed.** "Am I expecting myself to be skilled before I've attended a beginners' class? Do I know how students share their work, or am I imagining what will happen?"
4. **Prepare a small step.** You could ask the instructor how beginners are supported and whether sharing drawings is optional. Imagine yourself noticing the worry, keeping the page open and sending that question. Then try it.
5. **Review what you learned.** Did the reply ease your concern? Is there anything else you need to know before deciding whether to join?

Sending a question does not commit you to the class. It helps you move beyond the assumption that you won't fit in and find out what attending would actually involve. You can then decide with more information, rather than letting the initial worry make the decision for you.

A seven-day experiment: Try, notice and adjust

Choose one small change you'd like to make this week. When the situation comes up, jot down what happened, what you thought and felt, and what you did. If you returned to your usual response, notice what made it easier than the change you had planned. Choose one different response to try next time.

At the end of the week, look at both the occasions when you followed through and those when you didn't. Did having more time, making the first step smaller or getting help make a difference?

Suppose you planned to walk after dinner but stayed on the sofa three evenings that week. You might think, "I never stick to anything." Before drawing that conclusion, look at those evenings individually. Was dinner late? Had you slept poorly? Were you waiting until every household task was finished before going out? "By the time I finished dinner and cleared up, I was ready to rest" gives you something to adjust. You might try walking before dinner or planning a short walk on two evenings rather than every day. Experiments suggest that responding to mistakes and personal difficulties with self-compassion can support motivation to improve [2]. You can acknowledge that you missed a walk without turning it into a judgement about yourself.

Sometimes it's only when a plan falls through that we see what we've been asking of ourselves. We may realise how tired we are, how long we've been trying to manage on our own, or why a change matters more to us than we first thought. The experience can still feel disappointing. Over time, what we learn from it may help us make a change that fits the life we're living.

Conclusion

Even when a change matters to us, the familiar response can feel easier in the moment. Saying "It's fine" can get us through an awkward conversation. Staying late can ease the worry that a colleague will think we're unhelpful. We may also be weighing up what we could lose, wondering whether we can manage, or trying to meet an expectation we haven't chosen for ourselves.

Understanding what holds us back gives us a clearer idea of what to do next. Emotional awareness and mindfulness can help us notice what happens before we respond. CBT offers ways to examine our assumptions, while REBT helps us question beliefs that make mistakes or disapproval feel difficult to bear. Reflection and mental rehearsal give us an opportunity to prepare a different response and then try it in everyday life.

Sometimes, though, we need more than an exercise. We may need information, practical support, time to develop a skill, or a conversation about what others expect of us. Change becomes more manageable when we consider both our own responses and the circumstances around us. If an old habit returns, we can use that experience to adjust the plan rather than judge our ability to change. Recall one change you've found hard to make. What happened the last time you meant to act? What were you concerned about, and what would have helped? Let your answers guide one step you can reasonably try when that situation comes up again. You don't have to wait until every doubt has disappeared to begin.

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