

Changing Persistent Unhelpful Life Patterns

Bill O'Hanlon, Bill@billohanlon.com, <http://www.billohanlon.com>

In many ways we are constantly changing, while in other ways, we seem to repeat the same patterns over and over again. Life moves on and we keep responding as if we were somewhere in the past or still relating to people from the past. Or somehow we just repeat some unhelpful patterns, regardless of how, when or where they arose. Here are some suggestions for finally leaving behind old, unhelpful patterns.

1. Notice results you don't like that recur

Examples:

Always being in debt

Harmful addictive or compulsive behaviors, such as overdrinking, unsafe and inappropriate sexual activities, overeating, overworking and so on

The same kind of arguments or conflicts in intimate relationships

Being regularly taken advantage of by people

Accommodating to others in a way that compromises your integrity or well-being

2. Investigate and notice your actions, feelings and underlying ideas or thoughts in these recurring problematic situations

If you can, identify what outcome or feeling you are trying to prevent or avoid by reacting or acting the way you do. Often, our attempted solutions to some problem become the problem.

Examples:

You are afraid you will be controlled.

You blame the other person so you won't be blamed.

You leave first so you won't be left or rejected or abandoned.

You eat so you won't feel so lonely or sad or frightened.

You shop to distract yourself from an unhappy relationship or situation.

Hint: If you are having trouble identifying any of these elements, ask for help from a trusted friend, a loving partner or an insightful therapist/coach.

3. Do something different from your usual actions, reactions or patterns

Possible strategies:

Just notice the impulse to act or react.

Just notice and stay with the feeling you were trying to avoid.

Do something that might actually invite the avoided feeling.

Stay in a situation that you would normally leave from to avoid discomfort.

Write out or tell someone about the feeling, fear or outcome you were trying to avoid or forestall.

4. Rinse and repeat until you break the automatic pattern or stop getting the unwanted results

Examples:

You get out of debt and stay out of debt.

You stop having the same old argument or conflict in this or any relationship.

You stay in a relationship beyond the point you would have withdrawn or left.

You stop drinking or stop drinking in a way that messes up your life.

Suggestion: If you find you can't change these patterns or you can only make so much progress, consider using some of the new rapid trauma resolution methods (like EMDR or EFT), that can often soften or diminish the energy that may be driving these recurrent unhelpful patterns.