

Choice vs. Intention

REAL FREEDOM IS FREEDOM FROM CHOICE

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*We think that through choice we are free,
but choice exists only when the mind is confused.
There is no choice when the mind is clear.
—J. Krishnamurti*

ILLUSIONS OF CHOICE

Two widely held beliefs about choice consistently get in our way and make our lives far more difficult than they need to be. These beliefs keep us from focusing on what's most important to us and from accomplishing the things we set out to do.

*We believe that having more choices or options means
having more freedom.*

and

*We believe that everything we do is the result of our
conscious choice.*

Counterintuitive as it may seem, neither of these beliefs—that having choices is always good and that we are actually making choices—is accurate.

Choice does not equate with freedom. In fact, a mind that is busy weighing the pros and cons of various options trying to decide what to do next is not free, it is tangled and confused. When the mind is clear, there is no choice. The path ahead is obvious.

Understanding this has made an enormous difference in my own life. I've learned that if my mind is unclear, more thinking (or thinking *harder*) will not clear it up. All it will do is generate more bloomin', buzzin' confusion. So now, if I'm unsure about what to do next, I wait to act until my mind—and the path ahead—are clear.

Clinging to the belief that choice equals freedom makes it difficult to recognize and question the second assumption, which is that everything we do is a result of our conscious choice. What we think of as choice more often than not is actually automatic behavior initiated by the unconscious part of our brain.

Have you ever thought there was something wrong with you because you haven't always made the "right" choices or you haven't always followed through with your intentions?

We assume that we're consciously choosing to make those "wrong" choices or consciously choosing not to follow through. But the part of the brain that runs the show isn't the conscious part, it's the unconscious. And the unconscious is programmed to maintain the status quo, which means doing what it's always done before.

We don't want to give up the illusions we have about choice. We want to keep our options open instead of locking ourselves in. We want to be spontaneous. And we prefer to believe we're exercising conscious choice, no matter how ineffective or detrimental those choices may be. As a result, we often refuse to make a commitment, even to something we really want or that really matters to us. We repeatedly put far more trust than is warranted in our conscious brain's ability to override our unconscious brain's programming.

We're convinced that next time we'll do things differently.

The reality is that keeping our options open really means leaving the outcome to chance. Yes, there's a slim chance that when the moment comes we'll act in our own best interest this time and make a different choice. But the odds are not on our side. Counting on self-control or will power in the face of temptation or when trying to make a change is a reliable way to sabotage ourselves. Self-control and will power are over-rated and easily exhausted.

That doesn't mean we're entirely at the mercy of the unconscious part of our brain. We do have a say in the matter. We can learn how to use both the conscious and the unconscious parts of our brain to our advantage instead of letting our unconscious

make all our choices for us. But that requires changing the way we think about choice.

The alternative to trying to force ourselves to do or not do something, and subsequently berating ourselves for a lack of self-control, is to make a pre-commitment. The great thing about making a pre-commitment is that, instead of continuing to harbor illusions about choice, we're acknowledging reality.

*Making a change requires that we do something different
AHEAD OF TIME instead of counting on doing something
different IN THE MOMENT.*

Making a pre-commitment eliminates the need to make a choice in the moment because we've already decided what we're going to do. We have a plan in place. Giving up our so-called freedom of choice greatly increases the likelihood we'll do what we consciously determined beforehand to do.

Pre-commitment involves three steps:

Intention • Attention • Perseverance

IAP is a simple process that can be used to help change or create habits, manage one-time projects, or complete short- or long-term goals. It is based on how the brain actually works rather than how we're accustomed to thinking it works.

INTENTION IS POWERFUL

Our brain is actually programmed to conserve energy by creating and then following its own path of least resistance. It does this by developing subroutines whenever it can and turning them over to the unconscious. This enables us to get by without having to think about a great many of the things we do. In fact, we operate on autopilot most of the time. We have to because conscious attention is a very limited resource. If we had to give conscious thought to every little thing we did, we probably wouldn't make it out of the house in the morning.

In addition, our brain has a preference for maintaining the status quo. The status quo seems safer, whether or not it actually is. The result is that we keep doing what we've always done.

Our brain's autopilot does a fantastic job of keeping us alive, but it is very stubborn and can be difficult to override. Autopilot behavior could be called habitual, unconscious, automatic, unmindful, or routine. What it can't be called is deliberate. Since operating on autopilot maintains the status quo, if we want to do something to change the status quo we have to figure out how to override autopilot.

The way to do that is to create an intention. Creating an intention requires conscious thought, though, so the best time to do it is ahead of time, not when we're in the middle of a situation and faced with having to choose what to do. With no intention in place, the path of least resistance will be to do what we've always done before. That's not because we're weak or stubborn or self-destructive. It's just the way we're wired.

An intention is more than wishful thinking or a good idea.

An intention is a pre-commitment we make to ourselves to do a specific thing in a specific situation.

An effective intention spells out the what, when, where, and how of what we intend to do.

Instead of this:

I'm going to start getting to bed earlier.

This:

I'm going to begin getting ready for bed each evening at 10:00 beginning tonight.

Instead of this:

I'm going to stop eating so much fast food.

This:

I'm going to make my own lunch and take it to work every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

Instead of this:

I'm going to get more exercise.

This:

I'm going to take my gym bag to work with me on Tuesday and Thursday and go to the gym right after work.

or

I'm going to walk in the morning for half an hour five days a week, Monday through Friday.

Getting specific may require practice. And once an intention has been created, it may need to be adjusted. That's fine. Specific doesn't mean inflexible.

Intention is powerful not because it magically draws the things we want to us. It's powerful because it commits us to taking action on our own behalf.

All Intentions Are Not Created Equal

Intention is a catch-all word that can cover a wide swath of territory, from the most informal or trivial plans all the way up to major goals and even life purpose. We intend to:

- run a couple of errands on the way home from work
- complete the next chapter of the book we're writing
- stop eating junk food
- get more exercise
- be kinder
- make arrangements for our next vacation
- schedule a dental appointment
- stop after one drink
- look for a new job
- spend more time with family or friends
- check out a new restaurant
- get to bed earlier
- get organized
- get caught up at work
- call someone we haven't spoken to in a while
- be a better person
- take the cat to the vet
- start meditating
- respond to all of our emails
- make a difference in the world or in our community
- speak to our boss about a raise
- evaluate our goals
- do better at managing our money
- learn a new skill
- clean out the garage
- get the taxes done and filed on time
- water the plants
- do the laundry

What are some of the intentions you've had during the past few days?

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

An intention to gas up the car on the way home from work, an intention to improve one's habits, and an intention to create a meaningful life are not all of the same order of magnitude. By not distinguishing minor intentions from major intentions, we paint them all with the same broad brush and tend to treat them the same way.

I like to think of our day-to-day intentions as lowercase intentions and our larger, purpose-driven intentions—the ones that require conscious thought and choice—as uppercase intentions.

Identifying and committing to uppercase intentions not only leads to greater clarity and effectiveness in regard to those things, it also makes it easier to follow through on lowercase intentions.

ATTENTION IS ESSENTIAL

Intention is the catalyst for disrupting the status quo. It gives us something to aim at, a focus, a goal. But that isn't enough. We also need to stay focused on it and pay attention to what happens: to what we actually do, what we think, and how we feel. Staying focused helps override the brain's autopilot and keeps us from returning to the path of least resistance.

Since much of what we do is done on autopilot, we tend not to be very aware of our own thoughts, feelings, words, and behavior, let alone the effect they might have on other people. Being on autopilot means we aren't fully present most of the time. We're sitting in the passenger seat instead of behind the wheel. Our unconscious brain, which is driving, has its own agenda and will focus our attention for us unless we make an effort to focus it ourselves.

So in order to give ourselves a fighting chance to follow through on an intention, we need to come up with a way to keep our attention on it. Here are some suggestions:

Theme Word or Phrase

Find a word or phrase to remind you of what you're trying to achieve. Write it on Post-Its® or index cards and put them where you're most likely to see them. You don't have to limit yourself to a word or phrase. You can use a theme song, an image, a string around your finger, or anything else that works as a reminder.

Questions

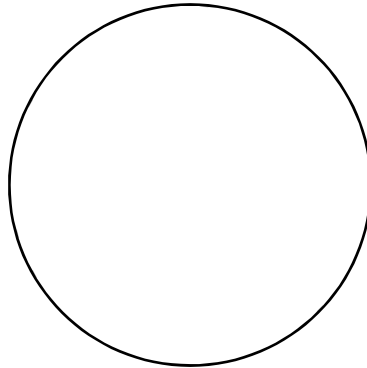
Create a series of questions to can ask yourself each day, such as:

- What is my primary intention?
- Why do I want to do [whatever it is]?
- Am I committed to doing [whatever it is] today?

You can ask and answer the questions on paper or in your head, invite a friend to ask them, or send them to yourself in an email.

Self-Awareness Pie Chart

Draw a circle and divide it into three slices to represent how much of your attention in that moment is focused on your feelings (F), your thoughts (T), and your body (P). Put the letter designations inside the appropriate pie slices. Then write your answers to the questions below:



Date/Time: _____

Physically, I notice _____

Mentally, I notice _____

Emotionally, I notice _____

Write as much or as little as you like. If you use this exercise to help with an intention, the best time to do it is when you have done—or not done—something you intended to do.

Calendar

Either designate a special calendar to keep track of your intentions or incorporate keeping track of them into your existing calendar. Make an entry—a check mark, a star, a sticker, a notation in a different colored ink—whenever you follow through on your attention. Just having the calendar in a visible location can help keep your attention focused.

It doesn't really matter *what* you do, as long as you set something up to keep your attention focused on your intention. Our brain has been programming itself all of our lives. Overriding that programming requires a lot of repetition in order to convince it to take us seriously and follow this new lead.

PERSEVERANCE IS MAGIC

We've created an intention and found a way to stay focused on it, but what happens when things don't go according to plan? How will we respond when we drop the ball or when external circumstances keep us from doing what we intended to do? We need to figure that out ahead of time because at some point—or maybe many points—we will encounter obstacles or setbacks. If we don't plan for that eventuality, we might be tempted to use the experience as a reason to slack off or give up. If at first we don't succeed, we could decide it's just not worth the effort or that we just don't have what it takes.

Changing the brain's programming isn't easy. Acting deliberately and staying focused requires conscious attention, which is in short supply. We're not going to be perfect right out of the gate—or ever. Perfection isn't a worthy goal. It's better to aim for doing better next time. Persistent effort will eventually persuade the brain that we really mean what we say.

Persevering doesn't mean doggedly persisting, however. Sometimes there's a good reason to stop attempting to do something. One of the benefits of paying attention is that we're quicker to recognize when an intention needs to be adjusted or scrapped altogether. Sometimes we just need to pare it down and start with a baby step instead of a giant leap.

Persevering means steadily moving toward the desired outcome regardless of setbacks or obstacles, adjusting course as you go.

Setbacks and obstacles are part of life. There's no point chastising ourselves over them or making excuses. Just pick up where we left off and keep going. It isn't a competition or a race. It doesn't matter when we get there. All that matters is that we arrive.

Perseverance isn't flashy or catchy or stylish. It's often linked with discipline and endurance and sounds like something that's good for you or that builds character. But perseverance is **key** to reprogramming the brain's autopilot. It really is magic!

Perseverance Trumps Will Power

Will Power:

- the ability to **control** oneself and determine one's actions
- **control** of one's impulses and actions; determination; **self-control**
- **self-control**: the trait of resolutely **controlling** your own behavior
- the ability to **control** yourself : strong determination that allows you to do something difficult (such as to lose weight or quit smoking)

Willpower is trying very hard not to do something you want to do very much. —John Ortberg

Perseverance:

- **steadfastness** in doing something despite difficulty or delay in achieving success
- continued **steady** belief or efforts, withstanding discouragement or difficulty; persistence
- **steady** persistence in a course of action, a purpose, a state, etc., especially in spite of difficulties, obstacles, or discouragement
- the act of persisting; continuing or repeating behavior

*If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again.
—William E. Hickson*

Will power doesn't last because it requires—and uses up—conscious attention, which is a limited resource. If you develop the habit of persevering, you won't need to rely on will power to push yourself. Your brain will be working for you, rather than against you.

Rewarding Yourself for Good Behavior

Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that is involved in the brain's reward system; its release fills us with a feeling of pleasure. Dopamine is part of a brain circuit called the mesolimbic pathway, which connects behaviors to feelings of pleasure. A pleasurable experience acts as a stimulus to wake up the mesolimbic pathway.

One thing that triggers the release of dopamine is the *expectation* of a reward.

When dopamine is released, emotional and learning circuits are activated to increase the likelihood that we'll remember what we did. A reward is positive reinforcement that motivates us to repeat the behavior. Small hits of dopamine encourage us to keep moving forward.

Rewarding yourself for good behavior by acknowledging and celebrating each small accomplishment trains your brain to help you keep doing what you want to do.

THREE THINGS TO AVOID

The **IAP** process is pretty straightforward, but there are three easy mistakes to make that could derail you before you get started.

#1: *Doing What You Think You Should Do*

We have many concepts about the way things *should* be, but even more about *how we should be* and *what we should be able to do*. In the context of creating intentions, banish the word *should*. It isn't helpful, and it sets up unrealistic expectations. Why start out by pitting your actual self against an idealized self who can easily do whatever it is you're currently struggling with? It makes no sense, yet we do it all the time.

If you have created an intention to do something because you think you *should* do it or you *should* be able to do it, let it go. You won't be able to fully **commit** to something you *should* do, and you're probably not **willing** to do whatever it takes to accomplish it since you think you should already be doing it. The fact that you aren't doing it means you're just not trying or you're lazy or incapable or have no will power. You've prejudged yourself as somehow lacking, so you've lost before you've even begun.

#2: *Biting Off More than You Can Chew*

Maybe there's an entire area of your life you want to revamp, so you create an intention to do just that. No baby steps; you're going for the gold! But trying to tackle too much all at once is another recipe for failure because the chance of succeeding is miniscule. Taking baby steps will give you a much better chance of succeeding at what you set out to do. You can then build on our success. Aiming to do it all at once and missing the mark just reinforces feelings of ineffectiveness or inadequacy.

Also, trying to do many things at the same time will diffuse your focus instead of sharpening it. What you will end up doing is giving yourself many opportunities to fail. If you want to develop a habit that involves doing something multiple times a day, start by creating an intention to do it once a day or even every

other day. Once you've succeeded with that, expand on it. Trying to do too much is an easy mistake to make when starting an exercise program, for example. Add to that the belief that you *should* be exercising for a certain number of minutes every day and you might as well just pick up the remote and head for the couch.

#3: Being Vague Instead of Being Specific

You might not be trying to give yourself wiggle room, but that's what vagueness does to intentions: it paves the way for you to wiggle right out of them. There are a lot of reasons for this vagueness. Maybe you think just creating the intention should be sufficient. (If there's a voice in your head that says if you really want to do something, you'll do it, tell it to shut up.) Maybe you have such a variable schedule you don't think you can be specific. Or maybe you want to maintain your flexibility. Wiggle, wiggle, wiggle.

Creating a vague intention is a waste of time. If you want to do something twice a week, decide on the days of the week and the time of day you will do it. If your schedule varies, make appointments with yourself and write them on your calendar or in your planner. Treat your appointments with yourself the same way you would treat an appointment with someone else. Give yourself the same level of respect you would give someone else.

If you know the result you want, think through the steps you'll need to take to achieve it. Make the steps your intentions and the result will follow.

CREATE AN INTENTION

The following three pages consist of Intention Logs where you can record the details of your intentions. Make as many copies of the pages as you need.

My intention is to (be specific):

Write down exactly what you intend to do and exactly when you intend to do it. Be specific rather than vague. See page 7 for examples. You may find that you need to adjust all or part of your intention after you try it out. If so, just write out a new intention. The point is to find something that works, not to be rigid and inflexible.

I'm going to pay attention by:

Identify how you're going to keep your attention focused on your intention. See pages 8-10 for examples. If you want to succeed, this is a critical step. Most people are busier than they want to be, and it's easy for intentions to fall through the cracks. Assume that's what will happen to yours unless you plan ahead.

I'm going to stay on track by:

Decide now what you're going to do when you don't or can't follow through on your intention. How will you renew your commitment? You could enlist someone's support and call that person for encouragement. You could write about why you are committed to your intention. You could restart your intention by creating a new one (writing it out again).

I'm going to reward myself by (when/how):

Train your brain by identifying a suitable reward for your intention. It's counter-productive to use things you're trying to avoid (sugar, for example, if you're trying to avoid that) as a reward for following through on an intention. Make a list of things you enjoy or that you would like to do or try, and then choose a reward from the list. This is an important step, so don't skip it or give it short shrift.

If you have any questions or comments about this process, please email me at Joycelyn@farthertogo.com.

Intention ● Attention ● Perseverance

Date: _____

My Intention is to (**be specific**): _____

I'm going to pay attention by: _____

I'm going to stay on track by: _____

I'm going to reward myself by (**when/how**): _____

Date: _____

My Intention is to (**be specific**): _____

I'm going to pay attention by: _____

I'm going to stay on track by: _____

I'm going to reward myself by (**when/how**): _____

Intention ● Attention ● Perseverance

Date: _____

My Intention is to (**be specific**): _____

I'm going to pay attention by: _____

I'm going to stay on track by: _____

I'm going to reward myself by (**when/how**): _____

Date: _____

My Intention is to (**be specific**): _____

I'm going to pay attention by: _____

I'm going to stay on track by: _____

I'm going to reward myself by (**when/how**): _____

Intention ● Attention ● Perseverance

Date: _____

My Intention is to (**be specific**): _____

I'm going to pay attention by: _____

I'm going to stay on track by: _____

I'm going to reward myself by (**when/how**): _____

Date: _____

My Intention is to (**be specific**): _____

I'm going to pay attention by: _____

I'm going to stay on track by: _____

I'm going to reward myself by (**when/how**): _____

LAST PAGE

Inescapable

In his book ***Stumbling on Happiness***, Daniel Gilbert describes a fascinating study involving photography students who were put into two groups, the escapable group and the inescapable group. After developing their two best prints, all students were told they could keep one print, but the other print would be kept on file. The students in the escapable group were told they had several days to change their minds about which print they kept. The students in the inescapable group were not allowed to change their minds. Afterwards all of the students were asked to describe how much they liked the photograph they kept.

The results showed that students in the escapable group liked their photographs less than did students in the inescapable group.... Apparently, inescapable circumstances trigger the psychological defenses that enable us to achieve positive views of those circumstances, but we do not anticipate that this will happen.

No, we don't anticipate that this will happen. We're sure that not having options or choices (inescapable circumstances) will make us unhappy and that having options or choices will make us happy. Sure enough, when a new group of photography students was asked whether they would prefer being able to change their minds about which photograph they kept, the majority preferred to keep their options open, which meant ***opting to be less satisfied***. But, of course, they didn't realize that.

Books about—and for—the Brain

There are many great books available about how the brain works. (See the Reading List at www.FartherToGo.com.) One of these three would be a good place to begin:

- ***Thinking, Fast and Slow*** by Daniel Kahneman
- ***Incognito*** by David Eagleman
- ***Subliminal*** by Leonard Mlodinow