

Expert Perspective



A conversation with:

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► Why it's so hard to change unhealthy behaviors — and what employers can do about it

In this edition of *Expert Perspective*, the Optum™ Resource Center for Health & Well-being (ORC) interviews two experts. Zoë Chance, assistant professor of marketing, Yale School of Management, offers her expertise from behavioral science about the difficulties that employees face in making optimal health decisions. Joshua Riff, MD, senior vice president of prevention solutions, Optum, discusses his thoughts on how employers can improve the workplace environment to make healthy choices the easiest choices.

Optum Resource Center (ORC): We recently partnered on a white paper titled “[Beyond good intentions](#)” that highlights the psychological factors undermining our healthy intentions. Why is it so difficult for people to make good health care decisions?

Zoë Chance (ZC): Our ability to act upon healthy intentions is limited by three key factors: the habitual nature of health decisions, our bias for the present and willpower depletion. Let's start with habits. We make many health-related decisions every day, so we don't pay adequate attention to those decisions. Many of the decisions are mindless.

Second, our bias for the present — we tend to live for the moment — makes it difficult to prioritize the healthy choice. After all, we don't experience the repercussions of most unhealthy choices for a long time. For example, we don't gain weight the instant we eat a donut. On the other hand, the benefits of unhealthy choices — like the enjoyment of the donut — tend to be immediate. Choosing between a certain and immediate pleasure and an uncertain future cost is intellectually challenging.

Overcoming these cognitive biases multiple times a day can be very difficult, which brings me to willpower. Even when we try to make healthy choices, our willpower reserves can become depleted, making it harder to resist future temptations.

► *Continued*



ORC: Are there any models that help us understand how people make decisions?

ZC: A helpful way of understanding how we decide what to eat for lunch, whether to exercise, how much to save for retirement, what pair of shoes to buy, is what researchers call a dual-processing model. This model consists of two systems.

System one is the gut reaction, our first instinct, which is fast and emotional. It can follow rules but doesn't allow for trade-offs. For example, if sweets are passed around during a meeting, you may find yourself eating a cookie although you may not be conscious of your decision to take the cookie. Anything we do regularly and habitually is likely to be more influenced by system one.

System two, on the other hand, leverages a conscious process of deliberation. Considering how many calories are in the cookie requires engaging this system. For many health-related decisions, such as whether or not to eat the cookie, we generally don't engage system two because we are susceptible to temptation. System two requires willpower.

People who are healthy may engage system two more often. However, the power of system one can be difficult to overcome, which is why it is so important to make healthy choices as easy as possible. For example, placing water pitchers on the center of a meeting table makes it much easier to drink water — without requiring a conscious decision to do so.

ORC: You mentioned another significant psychological factor: willpower depletion. What is it and how can it be overcome?

ZC: Even when deliberation between system one and system two has declared an unhealthy choice as “wrong,” resisting the temptation still requires willpower or self-control. Self-control is the capacity to alter behavior in the pursuit of personal long-term goals. Researchers have found that this capacity is limited and can be depleted. Resisting one impulse diminishes the ability to resist the next one.

If, in the course of a day, you've made difficult decisions that require using willpower, or you are feeling stressed, tired or sick, your ability to resist temptation starts to weaken. In other words, willpower exhaustion over the short term can lead to unhealthy decisions such as poor food choices. The goal, in short, is for employers to reduce the amount of willpower required to make healthy decisions.

ORC: Each individual health decision, on its own, may not lead to future health risk. How does this reality impact our ability to consistently make good health decisions?

ZC: Researchers call this “singularity.” Since our brains know that unhealthy behaviors carry a substantial risk only if they are regularly repeated, we treat each such behavior as a one-time occurrence. We rationalize that we will make a healthy choice “next time.”

Particularly with respect to eating and exercise, each individual decision, on its own, is not critical. Thus, it doesn't matter in the short term if you eat a cookie or skip jogging today. True, it might lead to weight gain and make you susceptible to diabetes or other diseases, but you would have to eat a lot of cookies and skip exercising for a long time in order for those potential negative consequences to occur. Unhealthy behaviors generally carry a substantial cost only if they are regularly repeated. Since the long-term cost of any one health decision, like eating, is negligible, people tend to underestimate the risk of choosing unhealthy foods because they treat each consumption occasion as separate and negligible.

ORC: Given the psychological barriers that Zoë just discussed, how can the workplace environment account for these challenges and influence good health decisions?

Joshua Riff (JR): Our on-site services team evaluates the workspace by focusing primarily on how we can help people increase physical activity, make better food choices and work more safely from the moment they arrive at work. We seek to impact both routine behaviors and impulse decisions to support the two decision-making systems Zoë talks about. The goal is to build a culture of health, which could include changes to the environment, workplace policy, communications and program offerings.

Examples:

- Encouraging regular stairwell use by enhancing the visual cues — brightly painted walls, artwork and attractive lighting — to increase physical activity
- Educating employees about healthy food choices during cafeteria tours (such as how much salad dressing to use)
- Introducing proper workstation setup and daily stretch breaks

While our approach is universally applicable across employers, the tactics we recommend based on our evaluation will vary depending on each company's particular office, culture and employee work patterns.

ORC: What types of innovative strategies have your clients implemented to make healthy choices the path of least resistance in the workplace?

JR: As Zoë said, consumers make many food decisions every day and most of them are made mindlessly. Influencing food choices available at the worksite can help employees manage calories, avoid excessive fat or salt, and increase options that are good for you. If we work with clients who have an on-site cafeteria, we make the healthy choice the easy choice. One client has altered their sandwich bar so that the whole-wheat or multi-grain bread is displayed in plain view, while white bread has to be requested. At the salad bar, they provide different colored ladles: green signifies healthy foods that can be eaten in large quantities, yellow suggests minimizing your intake and red recommends very limited intake.

We've worked with employers without a cafeteria and they have done things such as engaging a registered dietitian to evaluate the menus of local restaurants where employees eat lunch or order take-out food, and provide recommendations for healthy food choices at each.

Our clients have all found unique ways to help their employees be physically active. Some of our urban-based employers offer group fitness classes, host recreational events such as jogging groups and partner with local gyms. Advances in exercise science have reduced the need for large spaces to accommodate bulky equipment. There has been a lot of innovation in smaller, portable training equipment that allows employers to build an on-site fitness center where they never thought it was possible. Clients with sprawling campuses have more options and build magnificent on-site fitness centers, and they also stay innovative by providing loaner bicycles and helmets or even on-site bicycle repair shops to encourage commuting by bike.

ORC: What role does a fitness center play in supporting healthy decisions during the workday?

JR: A fitness center tends to be a wellness hub because the atmosphere is different from the office environment. Having an on-site fitness center helps overcome the perennial challenge faced by most people of not having enough time to exercise. Fitness-center staff can program workouts around employees' schedules and help them follow short, effective workout routines that yield results.

The Optum Resource Center for Health and Well-being helps employers improve workplace productivity, health care costs and employee quality of life through research-driven insights, innovative perspectives and ideas focused on driving a culture of health ownership among employees.

ORC: How should employers evaluate their workplace environment to identify opportunities to improve health?

JR: We start working with our clients at a strategic level by bringing in our population health consultant team. Consultants work with clients on industry best practices, population health strategy, client solutions and behavior change methodology to support their unique goals for better employee health and wellness.

When working with clients to translate their population health strategy to the local level, we use the Activate Audit, a proprietary tool from Optum that evaluates the employer's built environment. We benchmark clients against similar companies and provide an overall score that highlights gaps and areas to target. That, in turn, triggers recommendations for changing policies, enhancing the physical environment or engaging leadership. We then develop a long-term strategy encompassing the physical work environment, benefits package, incentives, screening programs, and company policies and practices.

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▶ **Closing thoughts:**

Behavioral science offers insights into why we frequently fail to act on our best intentions. By leveraging these insights, employers can begin to lift the barriers to behavioral change, thereby maximizing the impact of their health and wellness programs. When selecting a vendor partner, employers should ensure that the vendor has a deep understanding of behavioral science and the tools that can help create a healthy environment at work.

Sources

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