

Chapter 2

You get more of what you reward.

You want something. So do I. So does everyone. We all want something...or even many things...and we will do all sorts of stuff to get what we want. Whatever we say, do, think, don't say, don't do, don't think that gets us what we want causes a light to on in our minds: "bingo!--when I did/didn't say/do _____ I got what I wanted." Then, if we are wanting more of the same we say/do/think the same thing again and get even more of what we want. We say/do/think what we do *because* we get something we want for it.

The "something" we want might come to us very directly like a child asking (*saying* something) to get a cookie and then getting it. Or it may come to us indirectly: we do something for someone else and enjoy the feeling we get from giving or helping. That feeling is nothing tangible like a cookie but it is still something we want and like. It is sort of a mental or emotional or spiritual "cookie". It "tastes" good to us on some level, we like it, and so we are much more likely to say or do the same thing again soon because we like what we got when we said or did it the last time.

Anything we say, do, or think (or even *not* say, do, or think) is a *behavior*. You and I are behaving all the time. Your reading this is a behavior. Sitting or standing while you are reading is a behavior. What you are thinking while you are reading is a behavior. Humans behave constantly. It might seem silly to say that *not* saying, doing, or thinking something is also behavior but it is. Seems like it is more the absence of a behavior, doesn't it? How about this: ever tried not eating another potato chip after the first one? How about not saying something short and curt to someone you really think deserves it? Try not thinking some particular, frequent negative thought that usually causes you to feel down. All of these take a lot of effort, right? So, even *not* saying, doing, or thinking something requires us to catch ourselves, stop ourselves and all of this is...behavior. Being really clear on the fact that *anything* we say/do/think is *our own behavior* is very important because we will be using the word "behavior" a lot as we go on. Why? Because our behavior is really the only thing we can totally control...so it is good for us to focus on it.

Let's get back to wanting things. We said that everyone wants particular things or feelings and will repeat whatever behavior gets them what they want. This is true for every man, woman, and child on the planet. It is so true and so universal that it is an unchangeable law like the physical law of gravity. This fundamental law of human behavior is: "reinforced behavior gets repeated" or, even simpler, "you get more of what you reward." "Reinforced" is another word for "rewarded" but it is a better word to use because it suggests that behavior is made stronger with each reward—and that is exactly what happens. In fact animal research has shown that the pleasure centers in our brains—the ones that are excited by reinforcement—are so strong that some animals will neglect to eat and drink and will waste away as they focus only on repeatedly performing a behavior to get reinforcements. Reinforcement is VERY powerful! This law of reinforcement does not mean we are behavioral robots or unthinking, unfeeling machines with no spirit--put a nickel in and out pops a gumball. We are much too complex for that to be true. But it does mean that you and I say/do/think more of what gets us what we want. It's a law that's true for both animals and humans.

Around 1910, Edward Thorndike, an early psychologist who was interested in explaining how animals and people learn, may have been the first to give us a scientific description of this law.

Psychologists have since called his description "Thorndike's Law of Effect" but since that fancy name and the original scientific definition behind it are both harder to remember than just the simple law "you get more of what you reward," let's just stick with that.

By now you are probably thinking "well all of this is pretty obvious stuff--I knew this all along--nothing new here." You are absolutely correct. You knew this on some level, all of us do, but you would be amazed at how often humans in all sorts of situations and settings act as if this most basic law of human psychology either did not apply to them or as if they just forgot it. If you thought the law of gravity did not apply to you or if you just forgot about it from how tall a building would you jump? Ten stories? Fifty stories? How many? Sound dangerous? It would be. In fact, if you thought gravity did not apply to you or somehow just forgot about it we would consider that you are not in touch with reality and would need to be protected from yourself. Welcome the men in white coats...

In work with individuals of all ages, couples, churches, for- and non-profit organizations and businesses, volunteer groups, etc. I have seen people frequently act in ways that suggest they seem to have either forgotten the law of reinforcement or somehow think it doesn't apply in their situation and in their relationships. The fact is they were wrong and the results of their attempts to deal with other humans while forgetting or ignoring this law ranged from *just* unsuccessful to *completely disastrous*. It gets worse, though. We humans remember how people treat us and we change our behavior toward them based, in part, on their treatment of us in the past. So, when someone acts toward us as if we don't want or need rewards and reinforcements, our relationship with them can be permanently damaged. We stop trusting them and things just go downhill from there.

So what does this law of reinforcement look like in real life? How can you use it more effectively with yourself and other people (children, parents, spouses, clients, co-workers bosses, etc.) to vastly improve the odds that you will get what you want both from yourself and from them? Let's start with you and then we can move on to the other people. What can you do to use this law more effectively with yourself to make the changes you want to see in your own life? Let me tell you about Jack.

Jack needed to get in better shape and lose some weight. He was 40 years old and about 35 pounds too heavy. Over the years Jack had stopped working out because he found it "boring" and he sort of accepted the fact that he would never really be the weight he wanted nor have the health he wanted. He did want to be healthier but he also wanted corn chips and chocolate kisses and sitting in his favorite cushy chair. Chips, kisses, and the chair almost always won out. Why shouldn't they? They were easy, required no effort really, and they tasted good (except for the chair, of course, and even that FELT good). Sound familiar to you? Well, it was very familiar to Jack and he decided to do something about it. He knew that if he completely stopped eating some of the things he liked and made himself walk or go to the gym that such an effort would last about a day and then he'd go right back to the way it was before. That happens to all of us, right? We try something new, it seems like effort that isn't immediately rewarding, and we go right back to the immediate rewards of chips, chocolate, etc. Jack had been down this road before, many times, and he hated it--and often himself--for it.

Jack remembered that the most fundamental law of his own, and every other human's, psychology is that "you get more of what you reward." So he began to think of what he liked as reinforcements or rewards. "What do I like?" he thought.

"What pleases me even if it isn't at all related to getting in shape?" "Well," he recalled to himself, "I love to read...I even like listening to books on tape." He paired something he didn't really like that much (exercising) with something he loved (reading). So, Jack started walking a little every day while listening to a book on tape. In this way every step he took on his walk was rewarded by the book he was hearing. He also started *slowly*—this is very important for success. In the past he would create big goals for himself for exercising and, after coming home exhausted and sore from doing too much too soon, he would abandon all exercise, plop in his cushy chair and out would come the chocolate kisses.

This time he decided to go very slowly in terms of how much he walked. He would take behavioral *baby steps*. To really encourage himself, he decided that he wouldn't let himself listen to a book being read on tape if he wasn't doing something—anything—related to exercise. The exercise could be small like sweeping the driveway but in order to listen to a book, he had to be doing something physical. He also decided that making his goal "to lose 35 pounds" was not a good idea for him. It might work for many people but it never had for Jack. The process of weighing himself, reading his bathroom scales, and plotting his daily weight on the charts he seemed to start but never finish was all depressing to him. It was shaming and felt like punishment and he hated it. He wanted to try a new way. Because he knew that body weight is determined by lots of things, some of which he had little control over, like genetics, he decided to not to make his goal all about changes in weight but to make his goal related to something he had more complete control over: taking a walk. He planned to weigh himself every two weeks or so but he steadfastly refused to make his weight the make or break outcome—at least at the beginning.

Jack started with 1/4 mile—the distance from his house to the main road and back. He started listening to a book he had really wanted to read while he walked the quarter mile distance. Down and back took him fifteen minutes—he didn't rush it or push too hard. His goal was to just complete the distance while enjoying the book so that, when he was back home, he wouldn't have overdone it or hated the effort. He was warm from the walk when he got back home, felt good about having done a little something physical, and was pleased at having gotten through the first chapter of his new book. "Tomorrow I will listen to chapter two," he said, "and maybe walk just 3 or 4 minutes more." He did just that the next day. In fact, because he enjoyed listening to the book so much (hear the *reinforcement/reward?*), he walked most days that week adding only 3 - 5 minutes more each day. On two days he didn't add any time but just walked the original distance and on one day he didn't walk at all. He didn't beat himself up about it or call himself a "failure" but said "just getting myself out and walking is my goal and, if I do that, anything I do above and beyond it is gravy." Jack continued walking and listening and, on some days when he did not walk, he made sure he skipped listening to the book so that he would not reward himself when he wasn't doing some sort of exercise. Frankly, there were days when he walked *only* because he wanted to hear more of the book, not because he really *wanted* to walk. That was OK with him, too.

Jack finished his book in about 15 walks and already had another book ready to go when he reached the end of the first one. By the end of his first book he noticed that he no longer hated walking as much but looked forward to it as a way to get

some quiet time to listen to books. Much of this positive feeling was because he had not pushed himself to do too much too soon, a very common mistake we all make with ourselves when trying to adopt a new behavior. He also noticed that, over the days, he had added another 15 minutes to his walk and that because he was walking a bit more efficiently he was now up to 3/4 of a mile each day and was walking 5 days out of 7. When he couldn't walk because of the weather or some other reason, he began to notice that he missed it. This was the sign, to him, that he was developing a habit: a behavior repeated over and over until it becomes automatic and regular. He liked this new habit. Beyond the enjoyment he got from listening to the books, he also noticed that he was beginning to enjoy walking, the warm physical feeling he got from it, the fact that he could go farther now, and that he was feeling stronger and in slightly better shape. So he decided to weigh himself. When he got on the scale he held his breath and looked down and saw 233. Two pounds lost. That wasn't much but it was a start. He promised that he wouldn't weigh himself again for two more weeks--that was a promise he could keep!

Jack continued walking and listening and, after he had gone through two books, found that he was walking a mile a day, 6 days out of seven--6 miles a week! "That is pretty good," he thought, "especially for someone who wasn't walking at all just over a month ago." The next time he weighed himself he promised that the weight he saw would still not be the main issue, it would simply be one of many pieces of information in his plan to get in better shape. The most important factor would always be what he said or did or thought about his attempt to get in better shape; especially what he did in terms of walking or other physical exercise. He knew he could control those behaviors and, if he kept repeating these behaviors, he knew that over time he would see a difference in his weight. The books kept him walking and sometimes he even walked without listening to a book because he had come to like walking and the way he felt afterward. He continued walking, adding a little more on some days, until, six months later, he was walking 3 miles a day for at least 5 days a week.

His weight hadn't dropped off the map--he was at 226 but it was sure better than 235! Jack decided to make some changes also in how and what he ate. He did so only a little at a time and started just by keeping track of what he ate, how much, and when--tracking only, mind you, no big changes yet. He just wanted to know where he was in terms of eating even if he changed nothing. He still allowed himself to enjoy his favorite things to eat and, just as a result of tracking, found that he was able to reduce the amounts a little each week to a more reasonable level. In fact, research shows that just tracking what you eat with no attempt to change what, when, or how much you eat can result in a five pound weight loss over time. Jack was on to this.

After one year of walking, listening to lots of books, and making very small changes in the amounts of the things he ate, Jack weighed 220 pounds. His pants weren't as tight, his shirts had more room in them, and he was proud. He felt great for having done things differently in the past year: making sure he felt rewarded and reinforced for little behaviors that would eventually impact his weight and fitness. When someone at work noticed that he seemed a little more fit, they asked him if he had lost weight. "Yes," he said. "How did you manage to do it?" they asked. "By NOT focusing on my weight but by rewarding myself for little behaviors I could

do on a daily basis that I knew would eventually make a difference," Jack replied...and he beamed with satisfaction.

Jack did not lose all 35 pounds in one year. It took him two whole years to finally get down to his target weight of 200. But he was able to do what he had never been able to do before about his weight because he remembered and applied to himself the most fundamental law of human behavior "you get more of what you reward." He reinforced himself for every step in every walk he took and soon the exercise became a habit that came to need less and less reinforcing. He had rewarded himself for making small changes in what he ate and soon the changes solidified into habits, too. Jack was successful because he had followed the basic rules that are key when someone wants to change their own behavior: (1) he started small, (2) he took baby steps, (3) he didn't criticize himself for slipping, and (4) he just kept reinforcing over and over and over until the days became weeks which became months which became years. Jack's awareness that he would repeat a behavior if he was rewarded for it helped him construct a very easy to do walking habit that made a huge impact on his life. It took time and it took lots of books on tape but Jack now weighs 200 pounds.

Jack feels much better physically, emotionally, and spiritually and, by listening to over 25 books on the subject of starting your own business, he has become a minor expert in the subject and is thinking of offering his knowledge and services in his own business as a consultant. Jack followed the reinforcement law, applied it to himself, and he succeeded in making a tough but very positive change in his life.

What about dealing with others to help them change *their* behavior? How can you use the law "you get more of what you reward" with them? Actually, by following the same four steps Jack used with himself. And, whether using the law of reward with yourself or someone else, there are two things you need to do to really make your reinforcement have an impact: (1) reward yourself/them as *soon as you can* after the behavior and (2) make sure you are *very specific* in telling yourself/them why what you/they said or did (or thought, if they express it) was so terrific. In fact, when working with animals, the research says that you should reward the behavior you want no later than ½ of a second after it happens--immediately. With humans you can go a bit longer but, still, the sooner you can reward what someone has said or done the better. Often your reward or reinforcement can be verbal praise to let them know how much you liked what they said/did. No problem with that—verbal praise is excellent as long as it is given *as soon as you can* and is *specific*. Let's look at both of these and see why they both are so important.

Let's put you in Jack's shoes as an example of a reinforcement that backfires because it is *too late*. Imagine that you, like Jack, lost 35 pounds. You would feel great, right? Now imagine that this is the first time I have seen you in several years and so the first time I am seeing the new, lighter you. I notice it but say nothing. Nine months later, at a party, I come up to you and say, "hey, last time I saw you earlier this year you seemed to have lost a lot of weight." What would you want to say to me? Maybe something like "well, gee, I'm glad you noticed...it's been so long now I guess I have sort of forgotten..." Then you might make an excuse to walk away from me thinking "it takes him NINE months to notice what I busted my butt so hard to achieve and he said NOTHING back then!?...Creep." You might be somewhat pleased that I finally said *something* but it is now so late after all the hard work you put in to lose the weight that it is nearly an insult and it might have been better if I had said nothing at all. To make our reinforcements powerful we need to give them *as soon as possible* after the behavior we see or hear that we want to see repeated. If you see me hit a home run don't wait two hours to tell me

how great that was, shout it out then! Let me know that you thought my behavior was great while it is still hot. If you can't reinforce verbally immediately after a behavior, then do it as soon as you can afterward. Don't delay, though, because time weakens your reinforcement.

General statements are also very weak reinforcements and can sometimes even seem like insults. Picture this (it should be easy because it has already probably happened to you many times): you do something you think is just super like create a nice garden or write something beautiful or make an excellent presentation at work. Someone sees what you did and says "nice" or "pretty good" and leaves it at that. How do you feel? OK, now for the "back story": you have been working on this damn garden/story/presentation for three months now. Your hands have hurt from digging/writing/researching. You wanted to give up 300 times and didn't. You pushed through, with little encouragement from anyone and, on the final day when you reveal your garden/story/presentation to someone you care about they just say "nice." "Nice?" "NICE!?" Steam comes out of your ears and you stalk away justifiably hurt and angry. Why? Because "nice" or "pretty good" are just pat statements, they are way too general, and in no way take into account all the behavior you executed for so long to arrive at this product. In fact, the difference is so huge between the weight of all you have done and the lightness of so trite a statement of praise that the praise comes off as insulting, doesn't it? Your "someone" may have genuinely thought it was "nice" or "pretty good" and can't understand why you would feel insulted when they think they just said something positive to you about what you did. You are hurt and angry, they are confused, and the relationship is *Ice Station Zebra* for the next little while. Sound like a good way to reinforce behavior you want to see repeated? Nope. But there is a better way.

The better way is the *specific* way. In addition to making your verbal reinforcements as *soon* as you can after the behavior you like, also make them as *specific* as you can. Let's get back to the garden/story/presentation. OK, there you are in front of your special someone and you open the door to the garden/they finish reading the story/they see the completed, beautiful presentation. Imagine how you would feel if they *immediately* said:

Garden: "Fantastic—this is SO good! I love the way you trimmed all the paths with boxwood and then created a layered effect with the plants. The shorter ones on the bottom like those...what are they?...petunias?...and then the taller plants and flowers at the back. And look at the combination of colors! The white and yellow are so fresh and pretty against the green wall behind. You have worked like a dog on this garden and you made it into a little slice of Heaven!"

Story: "Wow. I never knew you could write so well. Your ideas are clear and crisp and you really expand each idea with images. I could almost hear the river running over the rocks when you described it. This is so good that it should be sent in to a magazine—do you plan to do that?"

Presentation: "Sam, that was just excellent. The way you helped us focus on the needs of our most important customer using all the research you did was exciting. I really liked that slide in which you compared the strengths and weaknesses of our competitor's position with the customer and the way you used color coding both in the slide and on the spreadsheet handouts to make the points clear. No one left that room with any doubts about what we need to do next to push this business forward—thanks to you."

How would you feel now? What was different between a very delayed reinforcement like the one about losing the weight, the very general reinforcements "nice" and "pretty good", and the

immediate AND very specific reinforcements like the ones above? If you got that kind of reinforcement from someone who is important to you, would you do more of that behavior? You bet you would...and very soon! This kind of immediate and specific feedback is so key to our developing new abilities and skills as humans. It tells us exactly why something we did was great and allows us to build on it in the future. If I know you really liked *what* I did and specifically *why* you liked it, I will knock your socks off next time! Most people will IF they get this kind of reinforcement from you. I wish I could say that I have had lots of this kind of positive reinforcement in my life especially as I was growing up but I didn't. I doubt you did, either, and that is a shame because this kind of reinforcement is like breathing in fresh air after holding our breath for 60 seconds. It gives us life and hope and direction. It makes a huge difference in our relationships with our children, parents, spouses, partners, team—anyone we are attempting to relate with or do anything with anywhere. It is that powerful.

I hope it goes without saying but I suppose I should add that your verbal reinforcement (praise) must also be *honest*. Find something in what someone said or did that you *genuinely* like and praise it *immediately* and *specifically*. Laying on false praise is certain to be detected and that will only kill trust between you and the other. Remember, you want to encourage the person to do things like this in the future even if their current attempt is not yet perfection in your eyes. Praise what you see that *is* good *now* and they will work to make it better in the future. Last tip: DO NOT praise and then take it back or undercut it with “advice” about how they could do it better as an add-on to the end of your praise. If they ask for your advice, give it--but only if they ask. If they don't ask they will probably come back to you (as someone they now feel much closer to because of your reinforcement) for your ideas about how something can be improved. When they ask make your suggestions *specific* and frame them as open-ended questions like “What if you tried ____ instead of ____? How would that work?”

To make sure we are clear about the first law of life, let's sum it all up. “You get more of what you reward” is an immutable law, like the law of gravity. You can say that people “should not need to be reinforced” but that is like saying that people “should not need to breathe”—it just isn't the way life is organized. This law works inside each and every one of us and, if we really learn it and pay attention to it, we can use it to make changes in our behavior and encourage changes in the behavior of those around us. Those changes or even initial actions toward making a change get repeated if they get reinforced (rewarded). Rewards come in all shapes and sizes and we need to find what is rewarding to us and make sure we get some of it after we have done something we want to see ourselves do again. For others (until we know more about what is really rewarding to them) we can always use the universal reinforcer: verbal praise. Those verbal rewards are most powerful when they are genuine and given as *soon* as possible after the behavior we like and are as *specific* as possible. The sooner and more specific they are given, the better. Such positive reinforcement will cause the behavior we like to be repeated and, even more importantly, it will cause our relationships with others, and even ourselves, to grow deeper and stronger. Even if, like me, you didn't get a lot of this kind of positive reinforcement from others in your past, it can start with you. Now that you know this most fundamental law and how to use it you have a responsibility to do so. Remember, as the first law of life described: you are *responsible* for your behavior, what you say and do and think. Your behavior is the place to keep your focus. That brings us to the third law of life.