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*strategies for success*



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# The Compliance Solution

## Helping even your toughest clients stick to the program

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Tough clients. Every nutrition professional's got them. You know, the ones that make you gnash your teeth, bite your tongue, and think; "*What the heck is wrong with you people? Why can't you follow simple instructions or do what's good for you?*"

But don't take it personally. Pharmaceutical companies and physicians are gnashing their teeth too. You see, medical patients aren't taking their pills either. When prescribed life-saving cancer, heart disease, and diabetes medications they take them a shockingly low 55% of the time.

If almost half of people can't spare ten seconds to pop a pill, how in heaven's name can we expect them to eat right and exercise? Again, as nutritional professionals, we wonder: "*what is wrong with them? Why are people so... illogical?*" Well, the answer's pretty illuminating.

You see, most of us assume that people base decisions on the rational deliberations of the logical left brain – the brain we like to call "our inner grownup". However, behavior research – including neurological imaging data – suggest otherwise. What really drives most of our decision making (whether we're willing to admit it or not) is our emotional, empathetic, image-oriented right brain.

### **The elephant and the rider**

In their groundbreaking book *Switch*, authors Chip and Dan Heath liken the left brain and the right brain's relationship to a person riding an elephant. The rider is the rational left brain; the powerful, potentially unreliable elephant is the emotional, intuitive right brain.

The rider might be in charge for a while, but the elephant will always win in the end, especially if they're at odds and the rider becomes fatigued from constant responsibility, decision-making, and elephant steering.

According to the Heath brothers, there's one additional – and critical part of the equation – the path on which the elephant treads. This is our environment: the circumstances and structures that shape our choices, often without our conscious awareness.

According to this analogy, when we complain that clients "don't listen" or "can't stick to a new program", what we're bemoaning is the loss of rider/rational control. Our clients' left brains are the elephant riders. They're trying to stay on track with a good nutrition or fitness program in an obesegenic, scary, emotionally taxing world.

Full of fast food, work and family pressures, car commutes, sedentary labour, and few opportunities for natural movement, this environment scares the heck out of the emotional elephant.

### **Strategies for the left brain, right brain, and our environment**

So how can we, as coaches, intervene? Well, according to the Heath brothers, we can help support the rider's rational brain in three ways:

- **Follow the bright spots.** The rational brain is easily rallied by the stories and processes of previous successes. Therefore, in the case of nutrition coaching, highlighting previous clients' successes isn't just about "marketing". It's also about helping future clients succeed.
- **Script the critical moves.** Without clear, explicit, step-by-step instructions, the rider spins off into a world of what-if analyses. In your practice, get the rider's tendency toward over analysis out of the way by providing crystal-clear, easily measured habits to follow.
- **Point to the destination.** The rider needs to know where s/he's steering toward. So point to the ultimate destination (wherever it might be) often. And let the rider know what it's like there.

Next, we can guide the "right brain" elephant in three ways:

- **Find the feeling.** We need to help clients find joy in doing the right things while working through the fears that may make them "rear up" and avoid desired behaviours. This often begins with identifying clients' key motivators (positive or negative) and speaking to them.
- **Shrink the change.** The elephant is easily spooked by big obstacles. However, very small, practical, daily actions and habits are easily absorbed; most often, the smaller the better. Just be sure the habits are directed at the client's biggest limiting factor.
- **Grow the client.** In most change situations the client feels small in the face of the change they're being asked to take on. Your goal is to help make the change feel small (shrink the change) while making the client feel large and confident in their own ability.

Lastly, we can shape the path in three ways:

- **Improve the environment.** Our environment determines success or failure, so we must help our clients improve their environments in order to succeed. Getting snack foods off the table and replacing them with fresh cut veggies is one example.
- **Build habits.** When a client's behavior becomes automatic, it doesn't tax their willpower. And healthy "action triggers" really support this. For example, if a client starts drinking 500 ml of water (action) after brushing their teeth (trigger), the behavior can become automatic.
- **Rally the herd.** No one succeeds alone, so it's important to create "support circles". Introduce clients to each other, schedule fitness- and nutrition-oriented social meetings, and help clients build a "health-promoting network". Elephants are social animals, after all.

### **One habit at a time**

Taken altogether, the strategies above can seem overwhelming. That's because trying to do all nine of them at once is too much to take on at any one time. Despite our misconception that humans are good multitaskers, most folks can only focus on and properly do one thing at a time.

So, if you want to improve as a coach, do *less*. Adopt only *one* new coaching action for a month or so. Only add in another action once you've mastered the previous step. Your goal for each client should be the same: to lead them progressively towards the desired change.

It's far too easy to give clients too much information and too many tasks in the beginning. After all, good nutrition and fitness habits are seamlessly integrated into your life. It's easy to forget that clients will take many self-conscious, hesitant, difficult steps in the beginning.

As Leo Babauta argues in his book *The Power of Less*, give out one clear task, and 85% of clients can stick to it. Add a second task, and adherence drops to less than 35%. Three tasks – pffft. Now you've got less than 10% success.

So start with one habit; ideally a habit that's small, manageable, and as practical as possible. When in doubt, simply take your one assigned task and reduce the difficulty by half. If you want clients to eat 2 vegetables a day as their first task, start with 1 vegetable instead.

Any tasks you assign must be clear and specific. "Eat better" is no help at all. Even "eat more fruits and veggies" is too nebulous. So put a number on it. For example:

- Instead of “Work out more”, say, “Do 5 minutes of interval exercise today”.
- Instead of “Eat more vegetables”, say, “Eat 1/2 cup of vegetables with each meal today”.
- Instead of “Improve your posture”, say, “Get up from your chair every hour today.”

### **Bolster client confidence by asking about client confidence**

One of the reasons we believe that people fail to comply with doctors, nutrition professionals, and fitness professionals is that far too often we don’t ask – we tell:

*Take two of these a day.  
Eat 2 servings of this every day.  
Exercise 5 hours this week.*

How well do *you* respond to being told what to do? (We’re guessing not well.) Usually, our clients aren’t ignoring our suggestions out of spite. Most simply don’t think these actions are possible for them. Truly, a diehard carnivore might find “eat 5 vegetables a day” as momentous a task as climbing Everest.

So, why not ask for your client’s feedback before dishing out advice? Really, when’s the last time you asked: *On a scale of 1 to 10, how confident are you that you can do what I have asked?*

In our practice, we ask this of each client. Not only does it help us shape our advice. It also enlists the client in the change process.

For example, if their answer is less than a 9 or 10, we know they won’t do what we’re asking. So we make the task easier. In fact, we keep simplifying, clarifying, and reducing the difficulty until they can give us a heartfelt 9 or 10 on the confidence scale.

### **So, how does all this work?**

This isn’t just theoretical knowledge. This advice is tested and true. In fact, we’ve successfully implemented the principles outlined in this article in our Lean Eating coaching program, a nutrition and lifestyle initiative that some have called “the world’s largest body transformation program.”

Remember the 55% prescription medication compliance – compliance to a quick, life-saving pill-popping? Well, using these principles of effective change, our clients – over 5,000 of them to date – do what we ask of them an amazing 71% of the time. As a result, they’ve achieved (and maintained) a weight loss of over 100,000 pounds.

The good news is that these principles are simple to understand and use. In fact, you could use this simple one-habit method in your own practice, starting immediately.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- What is my limiting factor with serving clients?
- What is one simple, clear, practical, habit I can start to do immediately?
- How confident am I that I can do it every day? (If you're less than 9/10, make it easier).

Then write your task down on a post-it note, refer to it 10 times today, and get going!

**About the authors**

Drs John Berardi and Krista Scott-Dixon are part of the Precision Nutrition team, a group of nutrition, exercise, and lifestyle professionals dedicated to helping people achieve lasting personal change through diet and exercise. To find out more, [click here](#).