



Excerpted from *Presence-Based Coaching*

By Doug Silsbee, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008

Practice 6.3: Habits and Self-Observation

This document contains a three page article with more information about habits and self-observations. Reading this, or the corresponding material in Presence-Based Coaching or The Mindful Coach, is strongly recommended to contextualize the self-observation practice which follows the article. The document includes a brief description of the practice of self-observation, general instructions for using the template, and a blank template.

The Anatomy of a Habit

Habits are conditioned patterns of behavior. We can think of them as our default responses to life's complexities. We learned them well, presumably, because they worked for us earlier in life. And, given who we are now and our current life circumstances, we may begin to discover that these habits limit our creativity, render us ineffective, or cause us to suffer.

This work is not about trying to figure out the origin of a habit. Rather, we are learning to observe the habit as it arises, in all its nuances and subtleties. With this self-awareness (really, an expanded sense of our own truth in a given moment) we find ourselves with a choice about whether to act out the conditioned habit, or, choose a new response that may be more useful.

Habits have five elements. These include a trigger, a constellation of conditioned responses that arise rapidly and sequentially through three levels of experience, and a resulting behavior.

- Trigger: something happens around us that we sense, and that evokes a response.
- Somatic response: how our body automatically responds to this sensory input. This is the biological organism responding, and is observable as sensation (energy, tension, tightness, warmth, numbness, etc.) Generally, this is the first element of a constellation of linked responses.
- Emotional response: the feelings that arise, based on our deep history. Observable as emotions (anger, anxiety, joy, excitement, etc.) This follows the somatic response.
- Mental response: the "mental formations" that provide meaning for our experience, and rationale for our response. Observable as language (stories, interpretation, justification, etc.) Because this is the highest order of response, it generally follows the first two, although the entire constellation can arise in less than a second.

- Resulting behavior: the behavior that flows out of the constellation of phenomena that arises. Observable as acts (movement, speech acts, etc.)

A helpful view is to be curious about your habits, and to “make friends” with them. Habits are there because the organism that is you has learned well how to get along in the world. Your habits have served their purpose. Now, you are becoming curious about their subtleties, and bringing awareness to the entire constellation of what arises with this habit. This is different from working at changing the behavior. Rather, you’re expanding and deepening your awareness of something that is in fact quite complex and miraculous.

The secondary effect of this awareness is that, down the road, you’ll become able to sense the first arising of the pattern, and choose whether to go the rest of the way with it or replace it with something new. The journey starts with your self-observation.

About Self-Observations

Traditional approaches to changing behavior often rely on good intentions. However, real change requires first being able to observe ourselves doing what isn’t working, and knowing what an alternative might be. Then, we must interrupt our well-rehearsed automatic tendencies and, in the heat of the moment, replace a habitual behavior with an unfamiliar one.

Self-observations are key to this intricate process. Self-observations help us:

- Develop the capacity to observe our behavior objectively, almost as an outsider might see us,
- Replace the inner critic that makes it more difficult to change with a neutral acceptance, and
- Eventually, to be able to stay present during an event, and choose a more effective response.

Self-observations are simply a structure designed to observe a specific behavior consistently. A self-observation usually defines:

- the behavior to be observed (e.g., interrupting others in meetings),
- the structure of the observation process (when you’ll observe it, for how long will you do this practice, how often, and what can you embed in your system to remind you to do it,) and
- specific questions to be considered about what happened, what your inner experience was, and what the results were.

The questions are designed to shed light on the nuances of the behavior as it arises. Often questions address the somatic, emotional, and mental levels of the experience, as well as observing what impact the behavior had on yourself or others.

Using self-observations over time leads to change generally as follows:

- We use 20/20 hindsight to reflect at the end of our day. We remember that we actually did engage in some heinous behavior (for example interrupting others) earlier in the day. We jot down notes about our experience, and become curious (“Hey! Maybe I really do interrupt!”)
- After several days, because we are collecting data, we become more attuned to the behavior, and notice it sooner. (“Oops! I just interrupted Joe!”) Still hindsight, but closer in time.
- Soon, the internal observer, which we’ve been cultivating, begins to notice what we’re doing as we do it. (“I’m interrupting Beth right now!”) Because the bulk of our awareness is still identified with the seemingly important thing we’re interrupting Beth to say, we likely finish saying it anyway, but awareness is dawning.
- We begin to notice our impulse before the behavior. (“I feel my energy increasing and my back straightening. I feel impatient. I know what we should do. I’m about to interrupt Joe. No, this time, I’m going to hear him out instead. Slow down, relax, breathe, listen.”) Now, we are changing our behavior. But it happened simply, easily, almost by itself.
- Self-observations are of tremendous value, and can be designed for nearly any behavior, including both behaviors that you would like to use, or that you use excessively or inappropriately.

Creating Sustainable Change

Self-observation, of course, is simply a learning device. It’s a means to build structure and accountability around the very intangible quality of presence, or awareness in the present moment. And, it’s only in the present moment that we can choose something different.

Sometimes, of course, our default instincts are the right thing to do. Our habits are there because those behaviors have historically worked for us in getting what we wanted and needed. However, to increase our range of responses to a given situation, and especially to replace an ineffective but frequently practiced behavior with a more effective and novel one, we must be aware in the present moment of what we are doing.

Through self-observation, we (and, by extension, our clients) build the capacity to pay full attention to what we are doing at any given moment in time. If we are present, we will notice our habitual behaviors arising before we act them out. The early, often subtle, somatic aspects of the habits are the warning bell that we’re about to do what we usually do. Significantly, paying attention to what’s happening in our bodies is the most direct means into presence anyway. This present moment awareness is what provides us with the moment of choice that Viktor Frankl, Stephen Covey, and countless others have spotlighted for us.

Recent neurological research (see the work of Jeffrey Schwartz and David Rock, for example) is increasingly demonstrating that the brain and nervous system is literally capable of re-wiring itself as we learn new habits. It takes energy, commitment, and attention to do so. And, most importantly, it takes repetition of a new behavior, with full awareness.

Therein lies the key to sustainability. With this level of attention to the granular nature of our habits, we become increasingly able to recognize an old habit arising, and to make a choice to do something different and more effective. As we make this choice, with full attention, our brain is literally building new neural pathways. With sufficient practice, the new pathways will become strong enough that they are the new default.

What we experience as “normal” will have shifted, and we will have replaced an old, impulsive habit, with a new and consciously chosen way of responding to similar situations.

Practice: Self-Observation of a Habit

Identify a habit of yours that you suspect might at times limit your effectiveness or interfere with serving your client. This should be a behavior that (1) recurs relatively often, (2) tends to grab you, in that there's a certain level of urge to it, and (3) you can see that there's a pattern to it. It gets triggered by something and you respond habitually.

Briefly describe the behavior. Then design a self-observation using the template on the next page.

Build an automatic reminder into your daily system rather than relying on good intentions to be successful. Then, commit to doing this self-observation for the duration you describe. Don't try to change the behavior. Simply observe it, befriend it, and become intimately familiar with it.

At the end of the period of self-observation, respond to these questions:

- What patterns did you notice over the period of the self-observation?
- What evidence do you have of increased self-awareness in the moment?
- Did anything change about your actual use of the habit? If so, what?
- What new actions are available to you as a result of this?

Self-Observation Template Instructions

1. A brief description of the behavior to be observed.
2. The actual structure, consisting of an event, duration, frequency, and tickler:
 - The event consists of the circumstances in which the self-observation is to be conducted.
 - Duration is the time frame for the practice. Usually two to four weeks is a good period for a self-observation. Choose a duration that allows between ten and fifty repetitions of the self-observation. We're after an experiment of set duration, a finite end, and clear learning.
 - Frequency indicates how often we do the self-observation: hourly, daily, twice a day, weekly, or after every occurrence of the event, depending on what's being observed.
 - The tickler is a way of embedding the self-observation into your systems so that you don't have to rely on your memory and good intentions. A timer that goes off hourly, a journal on a bedside table, or a computer reminder works well. Structure it for simplicity and accountability.
3. Questions that direct your attention to specific aspects of your experience and build your familiarity with the habit. The questions will be designed to fit the particular habit you're exploring. Here are some typical sample questions:
 - When, today, did you use that habitual behavior?
 - What did you experience in your body just before you used your habitual behavior?
 - What story or narrative did you use to justify the behavior?
 - Were you aware of the behavior at the time? Why or why not?
 - What was the result of the behavior?
 - With hindsight, what alternatives might there have been?

Self-Observation Template

1. Description:

2. Structure:

- Event

- Duration

- Frequency

- Tickler

3. Questions:

a.

b.

c.

d.

e.

f.