Recent findings from a variety of fields of study have all helped to expand and enhance our understanding of how and why people behave as they do and what can influence them to either maintain positive social behaviour or change undesirable social behaviour. This learning gives us a powerful set of principles, which can be used to help design social change interventions.

What we now know is that many of our choices and the decisions we make that influence our behaviour are not the result of active decision making. Decisions and choices are often influenced by unconscious and automatic thinking. These ‘decisions’ are influenced by our social and emotional contexts, emotional engagement, social influence and environmental prompts, and by factors such as timing and our physiological state. However we are capable of making rational choices and it is well known that when people have a chance to actively consider a problem or are engaged in thinking through the best course of action or decision. Such approaches can have a significant impact on how they behave and the choices they make in the future. Often a combination of approaches is required, with the exact mix being informed by a deep understanding of the specific issues and the group being targeted.

The following set of principles summarises much of what we currently know about influencing behaviour, drawn from fields of study that include (but are not limited to) management, psychology, policy development, economics, design, sociology, biology and communication studies. These principles are clustered under the following headings:

1. External conditions for change
2. Internal conditions for change
3. Barriers to change
4. Triggering change
These clusters, while helpful in terms of mapping the range of influences on behaviour, need to be viewed with the understanding that there is a great deal of interaction and influence amongst all these clusters and the individual principles that sit within them.

**External conditions for change**

**People prefer to be involved and engaged.** Participatory involvement often creates bigger behavioural change effects. Wherever possible, involve, consult and engage people in the selection, design, delivering and evaluation of interventions.

**Social relationships, approval and social support have a strong and persistent influence on behaviour.** Working with and through key influencers improves the impact of behaviour change programmes. Use the power of group norms and behaviour to inform and engage people in change, let them know that others are changing, and use the power of group action. Significant people in a person’s social network can be used to influence their behaviour. For example, working through grandparents can be a good way to influence the behaviour of their children or grandchildren.

**People influence, and are influenced by, their physical, social and economic environments.** There is a limit to a person’s capacity to change if the environment militates against this. It is often necessary to deliver programmes that tackle the underlying environmental, social and economic barriers to change as well as personal factors.

**People can be helped to change by designing services, procedures and environments that encourage them to act in a way that does not involve complex decision making.** Design services and environments encourage behaviours by removing the need for complex choices, for example making only low or non-alcoholic drinks available at social functions will encourage less people to get drunk. Removing unhealthy choices or other socially harmful options is often called ‘choice editing’.

**Internal conditions for change**

**A desire for or at least an acceptance of change** in the target audience will enhance efforts to bring about change, and it is possible to enforce change that people do not support or actively oppose, but there is a bigger chance of success if a target audience can be persuaded of the validity, necessity and plausibility of change.

**Beliefs and values influence how people behave.** Programmes should start by understanding the target audience’s beliefs and attitudes and use these to inform the development of behaviour change, systems and environmental change, communication tactics, and products that will assist change.

**Behaviour is influenced by people’s physiological and somatic state.** If people are physically aroused this will often affect their behaviour: tiredness, physical arousal,
anger, joy or a sense of relaxation will all have an impact. People’s somatic state (i.e. the shape of their body and how they perceive it) will also have an impact on their behaviour. Those who perceive themselves to be fat are often put off exercise because their weight impacts on the enjoyment they get from exercise. Many young men are aggressive because they have high levels of testosterone.

**Genetics can have an influence on behaviour.** For example, there are some differences in the way men and women as populations, if not individuals, behave in specific situations.

**People are often motivated to do the ‘right thing’** for the community as well as themselves and their families. Interventions that appeal to people’s sense of being good, fairness, justice, and community togetherness can be powerful. Programmes that stress a behaviour is one that is a norm in the community, and one that is valued by others, also tend to be more successful.

**People’s perception of their own ability to change can either enhance or detract from attempts to change.** Programmes can be developed that focus on providing support that will build people’s confidence, knowledge and skills: for example, teaching people how to recycle in a hands-on way can increase both their understanding and confidence about recycling behaviour.

**People often use mental shortcuts and trial-and-error approaches to make decisions** rather than ‘rational’ decision making. An understanding of these shortcuts or ‘heuristics’ should be used to develop interventions and new heuristics or ‘scripts’ that are associated with the behaviour you are trying to influence. For example, if people explain their view of the causes of unemployment as being due to new people moving into their area and taking all the jobs, it is possible with this insight to develop and suggest to them new heuristics such as ‘new people who move in take some jobs but they also spend and so create more jobs’.

---

**Barriers to change**

**Habit is a key barrier in many change processes.** People can be ‘locked into’ patterns of behaviour and need practical help to break free from or unfreeze their current behaviour. Programmes that provide practical support to change are easy to access and those that require small steps tend to be more effective. Sometimes it may be necessary to unfreeze long-established behaviour by confronting the problem in a direct and robust manner.

**Change is more likely if an undesired behaviour is not part of an individual’s coping strategy.** Avoid ‘telling people off’ for ‘bad’ behaviour if they are using it to cope with life. Demonstrate an understanding of the reasons for their behaviour and offer realistic and attractive alternatives that can give practical support to change.

**People’s perception of their vulnerability to a risk and its severity is key to understanding behaviour and developing effective interventions.** Programme developers should focus on understanding people’s perceptions and how they view the risks
associated with the behaviour that is being targeted. It is also necessary to frame risks in ways that people can understand and are meaningful to them. The way that information is framed can have a big impact on behaviour. As an example, people are more likely to decide to have an operation if they are told there is a 90% chance of success as opposed to being told that 10% of people who have the operation die.

**People’s perceptions of the effectiveness of the recommended behavioural change are key factors affecting decisions to act.** This factor means that we need to set out in terms that people value the benefits of the change that is being promoted.

**People are over-optimistic.** Most people tend to believe that something good will happen or that the possible negative consequences of actions or situations will not happen to them. People tend to over-estimate their chances of being fortunate. This means that we need to communicate in terms that people can understand the probabilities of both the negative and positive consequences of positive social behaviour.

**Many people are bad at computation and risk assessment.** Many of us do not understand numbers, risk ratios or odds, or even percentages. Programme planners should always test the use and understanding of numerical and risk-based messages before using them. It is best to convey risks and factual numeric information in ways that the target audience can both understand and find compelling (for example, citing the number of Olympic-sized swimming pools full of water that could be saved by fitting a low volume flush toilet is more understandable than giving a numeric number of gallons).

### Triggering change

**Change is more likely, if the actions that have to be taken are easy, specific, simple and clear.** Keep interventions specific and promote them in a way that the target audience views as relevant and appealing. For example, rather than making general appeals to promote civic engagement it is better to work to bring about specific behavioural change in areas such as the number of people who sign up to do voluntary work for a specific charity or NGO.

**Making the first step to change easy also helps to engage people at the start of a change process.** Making the first step to change easy encourages more people to start a behaviour because the initial commitment is small and in so doing reduces the inbuilt status quo bias that many people have. Because people like to be consistent once they have started on a change path with a small step they are more likely to continue with bigger changes. For example, asking people to donate a very small amount will increase the chance that they will donate more the next time they are asked to do so.

**People can be taught critical thinking and appraisal skills that can help them take more control over their behaviour and resist media, social and environmental influences on their behaviour.** Active consideration of a change issue often leads to more permanent change. If people have a chance to explore and consider
issues, this often helps them both to reconsider the attitudes and beliefs that will help them change their behaviour and maintain a positive behaviour. Critical thinking skills, once taught, will also begin to have an impact in many other areas of a person’s life beyond the original focus of a programme, and so can have many beneficial spin-off effects in terms of promoting social good.

**Behavioural experience can influence beliefs and values.** Programmes that move people to experiencing a behaviour as quickly as possible (namely give them a chance to try the thing that is being promoted) work best. It is not always necessary to rely on shifting attitudes first. Behaving differently often leads to a shift in attitude. For example, providing a financial reward to recycle in the short term can increase recycling behaviour even when that incentive is removed.

**The more beneficial or rewarding an experience, the more likely it is to be repeated.** Maintaining positive behaviour can be assisted by reinforcement. Behavioural interventions should seek to reward desired behaviours and when appropriate penalise inappropriate behaviours. Interventions should also seek to support positive behaviour by maintaining a relationship with people which affirms their new behaviour and encourages them to build on it.

**A change in behaviour is usually a process not an event,** and often will entail several attempts before success is achieved. When delivering intervention programmes there is a need to be persistent, sustain the interventions over time, and offer multiple paths to success. It is also important to design in the possibility of multiple attempts to change and support for every attempted change.

**People are loss averse.** They will put more effort into retaining what they have than into acquiring new assets or benefits. Therefore it is important to stress the potential losses associated with a behaviour as well as the positive gains that can be accrued from change.

**Many people are often more concerned with short-term gains and costs,** and tend to place less value on rewards or costs that might happen in the future. Programmes should emphasise the short-term as well as long-term benefits and seek to reduce the short-term costs. For example, when seeking to encourage young people not to get sunburned, emphasising the immediate damage to their appearance as well as the longer-term risk of skin cancer can be an effective strategy.

**People perceive themselves to be, and wish to appear to be, consistent in their attitudes, beliefs and actions.** This preference for consistency can be used to help them change. For example, if we ask people to make a public declaration to do something they are more likely to do this. People like to be consistent, and when they have made a public commitment or pledge to act in a certain way, this pledge helps them stick with the thing they have committed themselves to doing. For example, getting someone to write down their next appointment on a card rather than doing this for them is a way to increase the likelihood that they will attend.

**People are influenced by people they like and can relate to.** Liking is a key factor in how influential someone is on another person’s behaviour. Liking is related
to a sense of commonality with a person, a sense of being appreciated and listened to, and the exchange of compliments. Spokespersons, frontline staff and representatives can be trained to develop their ability to build good relationships with target audiences by demonstrating these characteristics.

**People are influenced by authority figures.** We are influenced by people that we perceive have legitimate authority by virtue of their status, position and/or physical characteristics. When using authority figures it is also important to test that they are perceived as having this status by asking the specific target audience for a programme.

**People will usually change their behaviour if they value what is being offered, or in the case of a negative penalty that that penalty has meaning and significant consequences for them.** Offers and penalties need to be presented in a way that people find meaningful and understandable: these should also be proportionate and seen to be fair. Rewards also need to be seen as desirable and do not necessarily have to have a large monetary value. For example, giving people who attend a cardiac rehabilitation service a different colour badge or pin as they graduate each stage of a class can act as a powerful incentive.

**Communications and media, including social media, can have a powerful effect on people’s attitudes and beliefs, and consequently their behaviour.** However this effect is not only confined to information transmission. The real impact of mass and social media on people is often less. The media can build up impressions of relationships between issues, set the agenda for a public debate and create emotional responses, as well as transmit information.

**People often exhibit decision and choice fatigue, and prefer not to have to act or make large numbers of complex decisions.** Interventions can be designed that will make the ‘good’ choice the easy choice. For example, having a system that automatically enrolls you on a social beneficial scheme rather than having to make an active choice to do so will increase the number of people who enter the scheme.

**Feedback is a powerful way to assist people to change.** Feedback is a special type of incentive and reward. It can be used to encourage people and provide them with additional help, guidance and support. Feedback in verbal, written or direct physical instruction helps to sustain change. For example, using checklists, diaries and review meetings is a way of recording actions and providing a record that can be reviewed and used to structure feedback and decide on how future progress can be achieved.

### Selection of supportive references and recommended reading


Futerra, (n.d.) New Rules, New Game: Communications Tactics for Climate Change: The game is changing behaviours; the rules will help us win it. Available at www.futerra.co.uk


