
Thinking about health like a behavioral scientist

Julia D O'Brien, Ph.D.

Principal, Better Living & Health

Center for Advanced Hindsight, Duke University



We have lots of problems to solve

We have lots of problems to solve

Overeating

Medication adherence

Under-vaccination

Smoking

Alcohol

Sugar

Opioids

Unprotected sex

Unnecessary surgeries

PCP Underuse

Physical inactivity

Stress

Anxiety

Conflicts of interest

Drinking water

Preservatives

Dental hygiene

Hand washing

Antibiotics overuse

Sitting

Screen time

Drugs

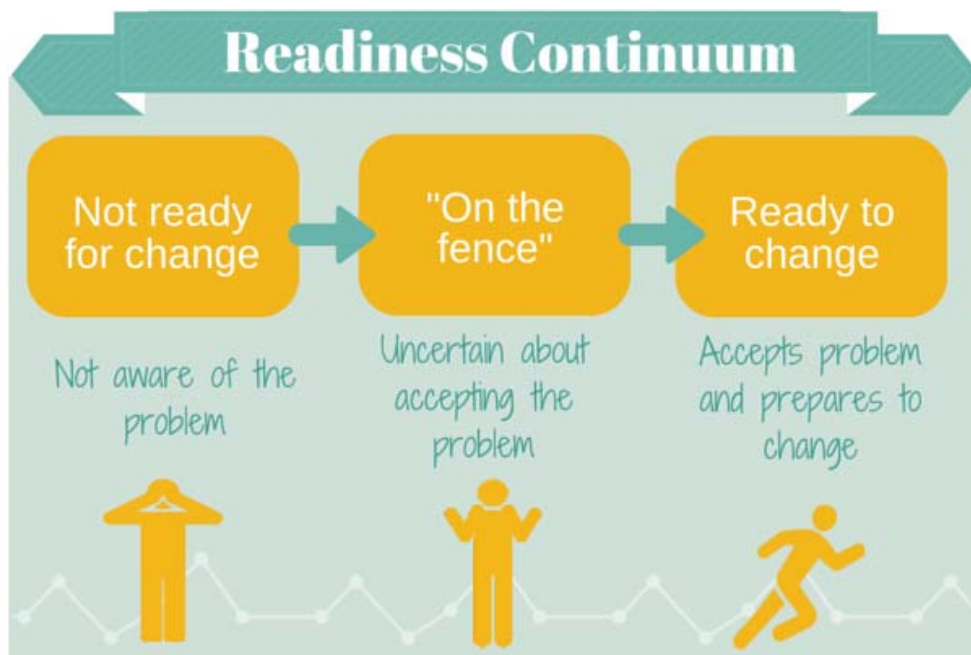
Time-out compliance

Palliative care



Intuition?

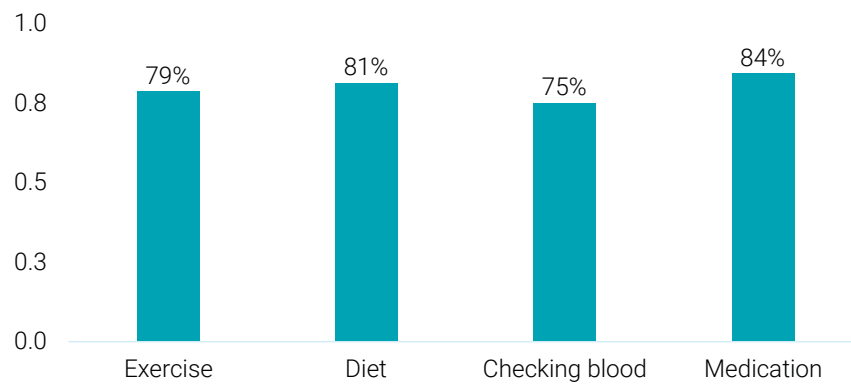


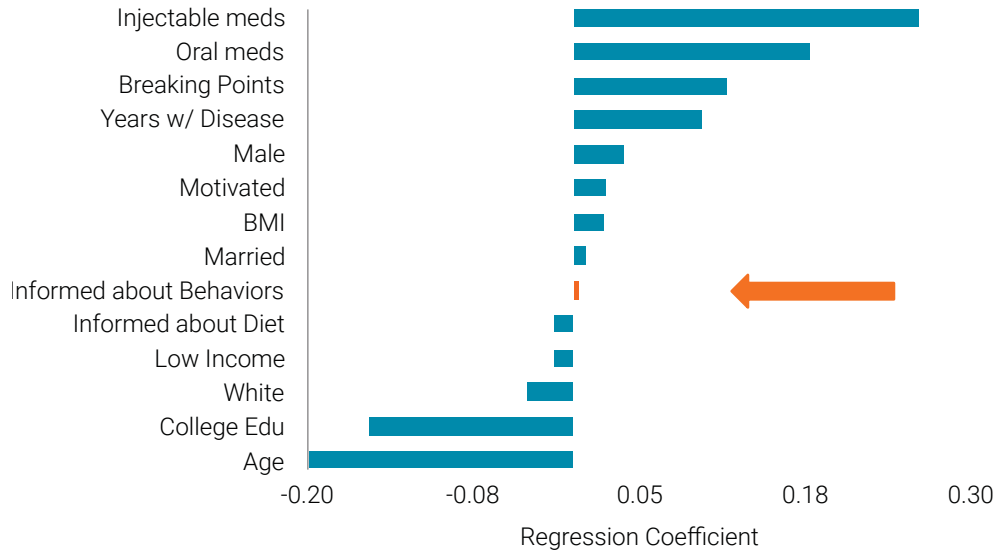


Does it work?



“How important are these for your health?”





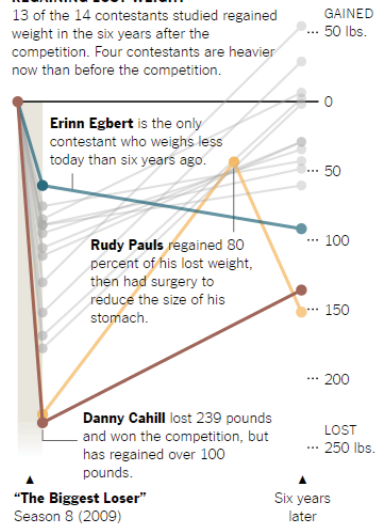
 CENTER FOR
ADVANCED HINSIGHT





REGAINING LOST WEIGHT

13 of the 14 contestants studied regained weight in the six years after the competition. Four contestants are heavier now than before the competition.

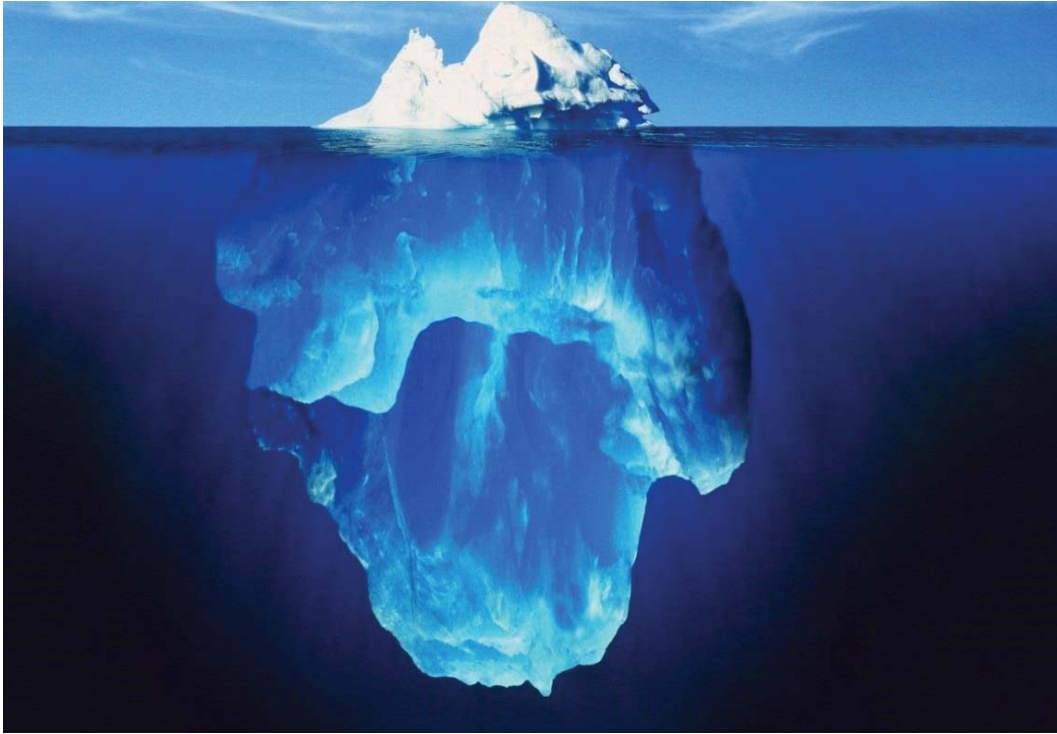




Why not?

 CENTER FOR
ADVANCED HINDSIGHT





8 1 0 9 4 2 7

**We ignore
unpleasant
information**



 CENTER FOR
ADVANCED HINSIGHT

**We see what we
want to see**

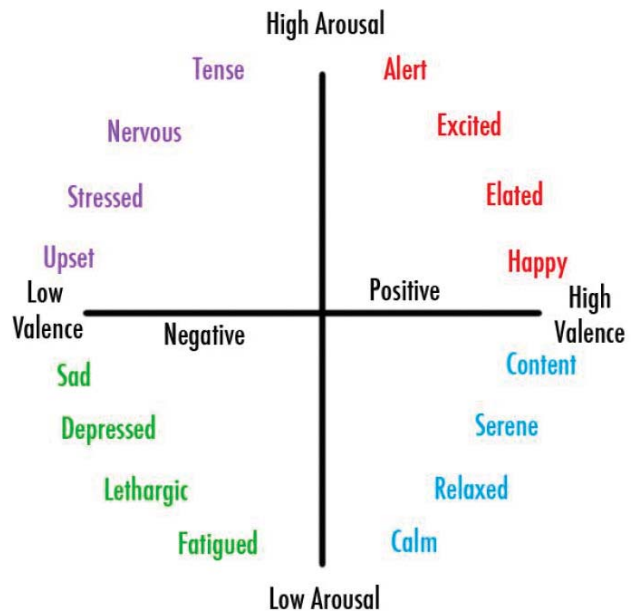


 CENTER FOR
ADVANCED HINSIGHT

Overconfidence:
We give
ourselves the
benefit of the
doubt



But
emotions
matter
a lot





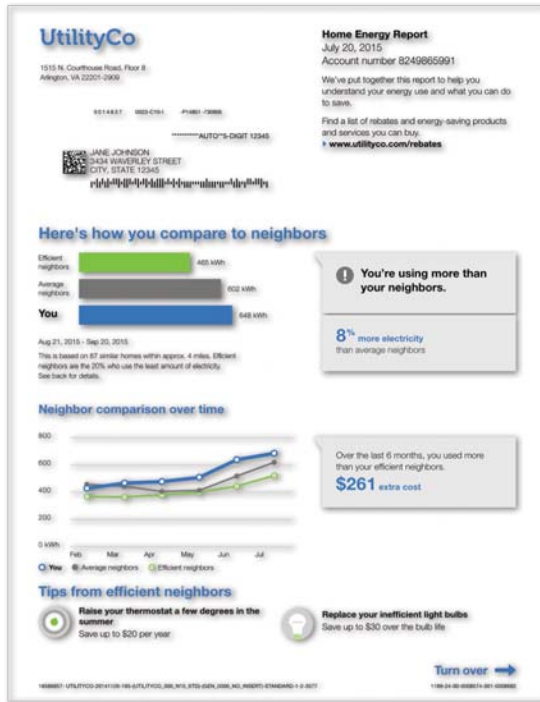
Context matters....

...so let's be environment engineers

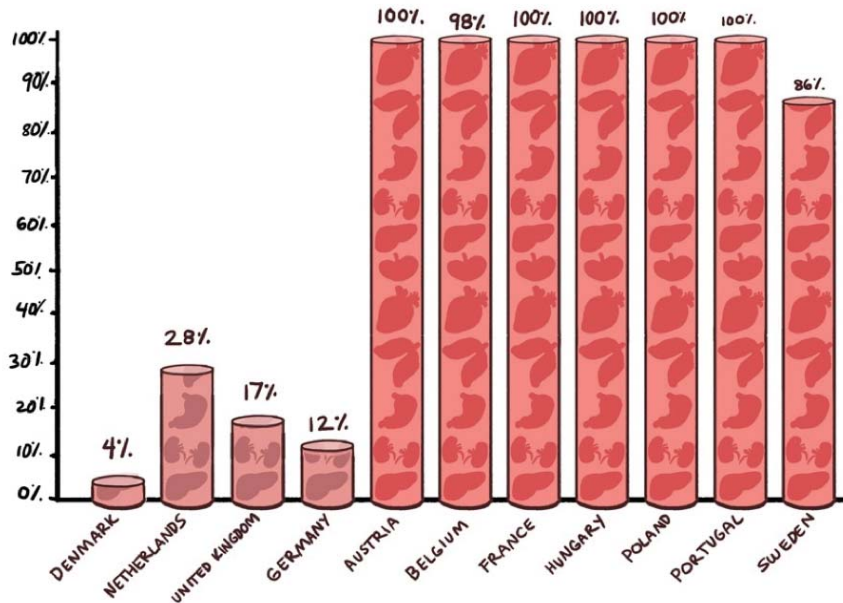
 CENTER FOR
ADVANCED HINDSIGHT









% OF DRIVERS WHO ARE ORGAN DONORS ♥





**Opt-in
Approach**

 Check the box if you **want** to participate in the organ donor program

 People don't check the box – and **don't join**

**Opt-in
Approach**

 Check the box if you **want** to participate in the organ donor program

 People don't check the box – and **don't join**

**Opt-out
Approach**

 Check the box if you **don't want** to participate in the organ donor program

 People don't check the box – and **join**

How to be an environment engineer



Principal #1: Change the defaults

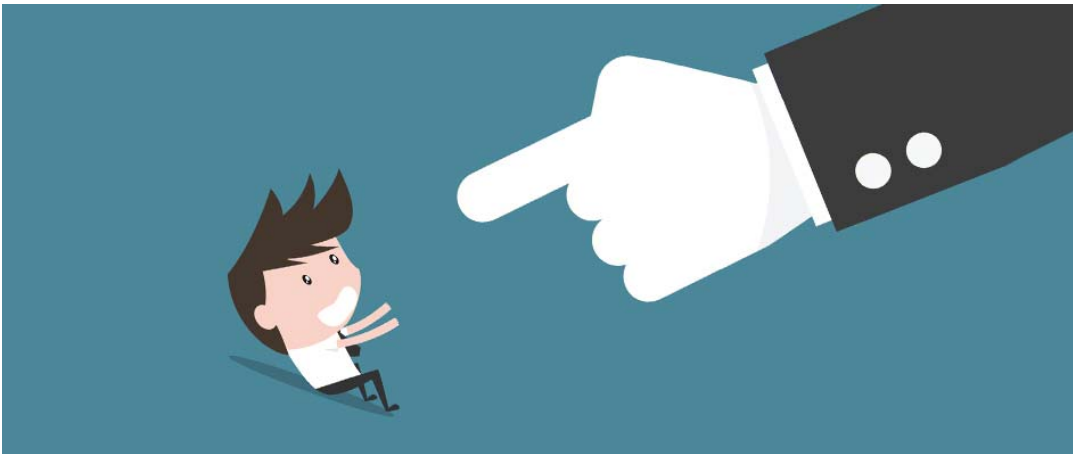
- The *environment* is usually more important than the individual
- Lots of things in the context can be *changed*

Principal #2: Friction

- Make it *easier* to do the right thing
- Make it *harder* to do the wrong thing

Principal #3: Reward substitution

- The present matters more than the future
- Right thing for the wrong reason:

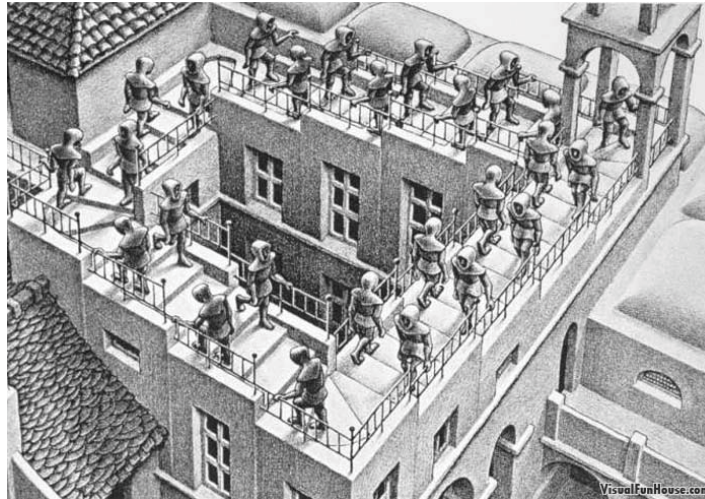


 CENTER FOR
ADVANCED HINDSIGHT



 CENTER FOR
ADVANCED HINDSIGHT

Humans are complex



 CENTER FOR
ADVANCED HINSIGHT

**Want to hear more?
Reach out!**

Julie.obrien@duke.edu