

## **Book Review**

*The opinions expressed in this review are those of the reviewer and do not necessarily reflect the view of CORE or its member agencies.*

**Book Name:** Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth and Happiness

**Author(s):** Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein

**Year Published:** 2008 with updates 2009

**Reviewer:** Mitzi Hanold

### Author's argument (or perspective) and summary of the content:

Small changes in the context surrounding decision making can have a large effect on people's behaviors. Nudges are everywhere, even if we do not see them.

The book encourages "choice architecture," that is taking responsibility for and organizing the context of choice in a way which moves people towards the best option, while also preserving freedom of choice (libertarian paternalism).

The book lists many examples of US based nudges that have been (or could be) effectively used in US public and private systems: investment companies, credit card companies, government prescription drug plans, organ donation systems and energy providers.

### Main lessons learned/ applications to work in the international maternal and child health sector (list no more than 8):

1. Behaviors that need nudges:
  - a. Behaviors that test your capacity for self control and have delayed benefits or consequences. For example, flossing your teeth, exercising and dieting all have up-front costs - the benefits are delayed. Smoking, alcohol and eating Krispy Kreme donuts - we get pleasure now and suffer consequences later. Both are prime candidates for nudges.
  - b. Difficult, infrequent choices are candidates for nudges (choosing a mortgage, finding a marriage partner, buying a new car). Helping people make the best choice in an area that is not their expertise - when people want to call an expert for help - it's a good time to provide guidance for healthy choices.
  - c. Behaviors that have little feedback built in or when the feedback system doesn't work. (We eat too many donuts; we don't know this is a problem until we have a heart attack 10 years later.) If we practice golf and never see where any of the balls go, we will not change our swing. Only by seeing the outcome of our behavior and getting feedback on our swing will be able to change/improve our golf swing.  
*\*\* How can we build feedback into health systems that don't normally have feedback?*

### **Useful hints for behavior change communication**

2. Anchoring: The order in which we discuss items may change the answers that we get. Asking singles about the number of dates they've had in the last six months first - and then asking about their happiness level gives a completely different result than if the questions are reversed. \*\* Do we alter the answers on our KPC surveys because of the order of our questions?
  - a. If we want questions to be answered in a way that is reflective on a negative health response, orchestrate the questions so that the responses move the person towards realizing the need for change.
3. People roughly hate losses twice as much as they like gains. People are more likely to engage in self-examinations for skin and breast cancer if they are told not about the reduced risk if they do so, but about the increased risk if they fail to do so. Emphasize not what can be gained by the new health behavior, but what might be lost if the new behavior is not attained.
  - a. If we are given a free CORE mug at the conference - we may be pleased. If for some reason our colleague takes our mug we may become extremely angry. Losing the mug is more hurtful than the joy we felt getting the mug. Same reason why giving people furniture on trial for 30 days without pay is an effective way to increase sales. (People don't want to lose what they've had for the last month.)
  - b. Talk about what might be lost if the new behavior is not followed \*\* Note that this needs to be accurate - not fear inducing.
4. When trying to convince people to try a new behavior, focus on the positive results of those who have already tried it. Saying "of the 100 people who had this operation, 90 are still alive today" is much more persuasive than saying, "of the 100 people who have had this operation, 10 are dead today". Fewer people will opt to have the operation even though the information is the same. \*\* Not sure if this contradicts #3?
  - a. To encourage a new behavior - focus on the amount of people (especially if it is in the majority) that have seen positive benefits. Do not mention the few who have negative results.
5. (Cues for action) Busy people in a complex world sometimes depend heavily on automatic system to get through life (especially in DC). Using small signs/symbols can help nudge people in powerful ways. Developing self control strategies to help people break out of the automatic system is helpful
  - a. Using cross-hash lines on a dangerous curve on the road with lines closer together the closer you get to the curve is an illusion that makes it appear that you are going faster. It encourages people to slow down. If, however, you never have had lines on the road, adding lines probably is a change that increases slowing down. Do something out of the ordinary to break people out of the automatic system (making decisions without thinking).
  - b. Speed bumps painted on the road encourage people to slow down (only tourists and people who don't live in the neighborhood). Painted speed bumps provide less damage to cars and are cheaper than real ones.

- c. Putting a picture of a fly or bee near the drain in urinals increases aim. Enough said.
  - d. Adding smiley faces to energy bills of people who conserve energy (and sad faces to the bills of those who use more energy than their neighbors) increases change (see additional notes on this later).
6. (Social norms) Humans are easily nudged by other humans. Doing what others do and avoiding things which appear to be socially unacceptable.
- a. We are more likely to download songs that have higher ratings and higher number of downloads on a website than songs with low rankings. In fact we will automatically rank the songs with higher ratings as superior (even when they are not). Our song ratings change dramatically when you don't know how others have rated them. \*\* Could be the same for group book reviews!
  - b. A good nudge is to inform people what other people are doing (if they are doing the correct behavior). You are more likely to comply if you think everyone else in the group is doing these actions. \*\* Nine out of 10 SBC members come to all of the meetings. Nine of out 10 SBC members read books off the booklist.
  - c. If you want to nudge people in socially desirable way, do not, by all means, let them know that their current actions are better than the social norm (saying, "You use less energy than all your neighbors," actually encourages higher energy consumption).
  - d. People don't want to be on the bad list. Threatening to publish (expose) people who do not change can lead to good social pressure. For example, gas stations that post pictures of the people who have stolen or used counterfeit money in their store.
7. The mere measurement of a behavior can nudge towards change. Asking about exercise in the last two weeks, can nudge people to be more active. Priming them AFTER they agree to floss more makes the nudge stronger. For instance asking them when they will floss, and how they plan to do it will bring greater change.
- a. Asking, "Do you intend to buy a car in the next six months" increases purchase rates by 35%. Persuasive educational messages given to college students about tetanus and the importance of going to the health center only resulted in 3% of the students going. Given the same lectures and a copy of the campus map with the location of the health center circled following the discussion brought 28% of college students to the health center. Asking when and how increased the health seeking behavior by nine times.
8. Help people with mapping - transforming numerical information about various option into units that translate more readily. \*\* This is why the food pyramid doesn't work. It is it too difficult to understand how to incorporate all of these foods into the daily diet.
- a. Instead of talking about the importance of iron in a mother's diet, help her choose one local food which is available, economical, and easy to prepare which she can add to her porridge each day.
  - b. Adding emotional nudges are highly effective - on the energy bill - using a smiley face for low energy consumers (and letting them know

that they did better than all their neighbors) actually eliminates the boomerang effect. (If you don't put the smiley face, they increase consumption - because they are lower than all others. However, if they know that low energy consumption makes me happy (:, then they maintain this good behavior.

- c. Making it easier to translate health benefits from action - helps encourage change. For example, a thermostat telling you how much money you can save if you lower the temperature by one degree.
- d. The Stairmaster telling you that after 10 minutes you have burned a bag of carrots, but after 40 minutes a large cookie.

**Related websites:**

- The author's blog of ideas and nudges that have worked around the world. <http://nudges.org/>
- Stickk.com - website where you can commit to making changes in your life - using either a financial or a nonfinancial incentive. For example, you might agree to pay online for a commitment to lose 50 lbs by Christmas. You verify how this goal will be met (weigh-in at a doctor's office). If you reach your goal, your money is refunded back to your credit card. If you fail, your money goes to charity (or an arch-rival sports team, for example). Team commitments can also be made.

[Reader's professional opinion on the author's argument \(perspective\) \[i.e. Was his/her point valid? How does the author's view compare to the opinions of CORE and its member organizations?\]](#)

The author uses different terminology (comes from an economic background) and his arguments mostly revolve around U.S. systems. However, the principles mesh easily with what we know about behavior change and believe about human behavior.

[On a scale of 1 \(not recommend to others in SBC\) to 10 \(highly recommended for others in SBC\) – how would you rate this book?](#)

I would give it a 7 on a scale of 10 - good ideas from a different sector but many of the examples seemed complex (government health plans, housing markets, and legalized marriage) and thus lacked some comparison with scenarios where we work internationally.