
Toward digital support for reflection over routines in lifestyle change

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Abstract

We present how our previous work has pointed out the importance of routines for long term lifestyle change, as well as the adaptation and evolution of those routines. Based on this we outline a follow up study to explore how we can support users in reflecting over such routines.

Keywords

Routines, lifestyle change, long term perspective

Introduction

Obesity, cardio-vascular disease, and diabetes are just examples of health challenges facing the modern western society. These challenges require significant changes in life style (eating, working, exercising), and continuous reflection and monitoring for positive results to last. Even though professional help from doctors and other professionals is valuable to achieve such changes, a significant amount of self monitoring and reflection is needed to create sustainable change.

In the past few years, the CHI community has dedicated quite some effort to lifestyle applications supporting a number of issues such as physical activity [2, 3], diabetes management [5], and stress management [7]. However, most studies on technology that supports behavior change focus on motivation and the initial phase of for example start to exercise, e.g.

[2, 4]. Less attention is given to how people manage to maintain a new habit in the long run. We believe the long term perspective is important and that mobile devices and services can play a supportive role.

Previous work has pointed out the importance of routines when it comes to life style change, and that those routines must evolve over time for a life style change to become stable [6].

To explore this long term perspective and the role of routines we have carried out a study of recovering members of different twelve step programs [6] and are planning a follow up study particularly looking at routines.

Background on the Twelve Step program

Our eight participants were recovering members of various Twelve Step programs with 2-23 years of stable recovery. The Twelve Steps were written within Alcoholics Anonymous [1] in the late 1930s as a way for alcoholics to recover from alcoholism and have since been adapted to many other addictions. The Steps are a personal guide to recovery that is preferably worked with a sponsor, a mentor that has worked them before and can share his/her experience.

Previous work on routines

Routines are crucial tools in recovery [6], both for supporting desired behavior and thinking, and avoid undesired behavior and thinking. Routines connected to recovery work can be daily, others weekly or less frequent. They do not have to be advanced; simple things such as read from a daily reader every morning and try to focus on that topic during the day, or going regularly to Twelve Step meetings can be very helpful.

Our participants reported that routines helped them to stay on track in their recovery and to feel sure that they were prepared to meet the immediate future.

If I would skip my morning meditation, now that has not happened in years, but if I would, I know by experience that I'll have a fairly bad day. (P4)

Routines are a way of creating stability and safety in everyday life, and deviation from established routines sometimes caused anxiety and worry for our participants. For example, P3 reported that if he deviated from his routines to contact other members, such as his sponsor, he lost confidence in their relations and started to question himself.

Then the thoughts start to come, 'he is probably busy, he hasn't time for me, he doesn't want to talk to me'. But if I call regularly, just to say 'Hi', then those thoughts go away. (P3)

Good intentions meet everyday life

Establishing routines can be difficult, even though they are desired, and connected to important goals or activities. Some parts of the day are busier than others which can make it difficult to find time for recovery work, for example mornings are often busy with preparations for work or school. Many of our participants struggled with their morning routines trying to get children to school, getting ready for work, or just getting out of bed early enough to fit some recovery work into the morning.

I used to get up early and meditate for twenty minutes every morning, but then I thought I could sleep a bit longer instead. So it is not easy [laughs] (P3)

Family duties can also make it complicated to establish routines for recovery work. Recovery is important but parent responsibility takes precedence. Several of our participants had children who needed attention, and help to get ready for school or after school activities. For example, P6 reported having to come up with completely new routines for recovery work after the birth of her daughter, sometimes stricter than before she became a mom since the room for compromises or improvisation became slim. Even though her daughter had top priority, she sometimes found it hard to be forced to set recovery aside.

I would love to have those five minutes in the morning, I get so envious when I hear people say they light a candle to start the day, take a quiet moment and read today's text. I start the day with a diaper change. (P6)

Deviations from everyday life can make it difficult to keep up the recovery work. Participants gave examples of both happy occasions and sad events where they had lost track of normal routines. P5 talked about how easy it was to forget about the program when she traveled, and therefore appreciated very much when she could find a meeting at her destination. P1 reported different reactions to two family crises, one where her qi gong routines fell apart and one where she could keep them together.

It got very chaotic when my son tried drugs, so I quit everything. Let go of the qi gong, just like that. And I didn't even notice. ... But then, then when my father was dying I stuck to it, I did qi gong in the hospital. ... Sometimes it is easier in crisis than in everyday life. (P1)

Plan B – when the routines fail

As described above, routines were important for our participants but also difficult to establish and maintain. Everyday life does not always lend itself to good intentions and reasonable plans. Even though the purpose of a routine is to do something specific regularly and with as few exceptions as possible, it can be very useful to have a plan B when plan A fails. Many of our participants reported that they just tried to get back to their regular routine if they got sidetracked for one reason or another. But some of them had backup plans for certain situations, for example P8 had a short version of her morning meditation that she could do on the train if she overslept.

If I don't have time before I leave home I do it on the train [the quiet moment]. And then it's handy because I have email in my phone so I can read those emails [from a recovery mailing list] there. (P2)

P6 had started to rethink her view of having a quiet moment to start the day like she heard other people talking about. Since she had realized that such a routine was incompatible with her current family situation she thought about trying to fit that moment into another part of the day.

I'm thinking it would be more practical to turn it around, and, maybe, have that moment in the evening. Just lock myself up for five minutes and finish the day instead. ... Think about tomorrow in the evening instead. (P6)

She had not tried to put that in place yet, but the insight that there might be a better way was an important step. Routines need to be reasonable to

work, and everyone needs to find their own working solution. Reflection over why routines do not work, and how they could be improved is needed on a regular basis.

Future work

To follow up on the above described results on routines, we are planning a study that specifically investigates how members of Twelve Step programs rely on, negotiate, and update their routines.

Through diaries and interviews we will explore how people work to create routines into their everyday life, how they deal with breakdowns, and how new routines evolve. The purpose is to investigate what types of support digital services and mobile services could provide for reflecting over routines and life style change. We believe that mobile devices could be helpful for example through data collection to provide a basis for reflection, and that digital services in general could provide visualizations that might help people reflect over their life style and their routines.

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Short Bio

Stina Nylander is a senior researcher at the Swedish Institute of Computer Science and at the Mobile Life Centre of Excellence, both located in Stockholm, Sweden. Her main research focus is the design, and the real life use of mobile services. Most recently she has

worked with for example Internet use from cell phones, mobile ICT for preschool parents, and entrepreneurs' use of social media.

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