Six reasons why it's hard to lead a healthier life

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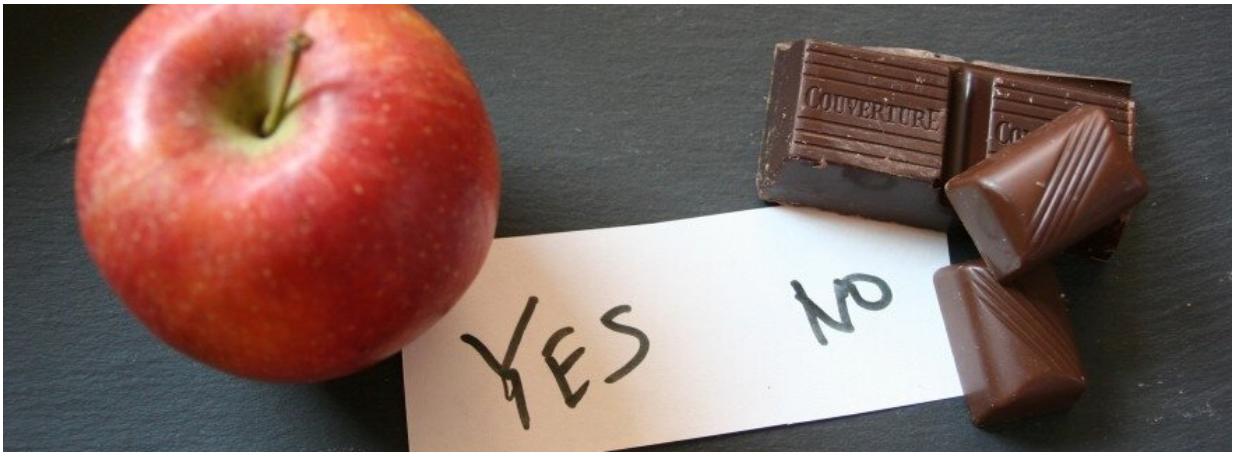

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We know we should do it, and we often want to, but… Why is it so hard to live a healthier life? Professor of Behavioral Interventions in Population Health Marieke Adriaanse explains.

The Scientific Council for Government Policy recently warned that healthcare will become unaffordable in the future. The Council estimates that by 2060, one person in three will have to work in healthcare, as compared to one in seven now. One of the solutions for this future problem is to lead a healthier lifestyle. But for many people, this is a huge challenge. Here's why.

1. 'Homo rationalis' is a myth

"Science has convincingly shown in a multitude of studies that exercise offers a miracle cure for an incredible range of conditions. There has been much less research into how to stimulate people to exercise and adopt a healthier lifestyle. For far too long, our belief has been that it's enough for a doctor to tell patients that a healthy weight will halve their risk of cardiovascular disease. We've been far too optimistic about people's self-reliance, and 'homo rationalis' turns out to be a myth. Knowing that something is healthy doesn't mean you're motivated to do it, let alone that you're able to."

2. Our good intentions are not concrete enough

"Many people have good intentions, such as 'losing 10 kilos' or 'eating fewer sweets.' But they don't make these resolutions concrete enough. What exactly will you no longer do? Or better yet: what exactly will you do? And where and when will you do it? Will you for example take an apple to work to make it easier to resist the vending machine when you get hungry at 4 PM? It sounds simple, but in practice, we don't think concretely enough about our intended behavior."

3. Our willpower is not very strong

"Do you currently have a healthy lifestyle? And do you believe that this is thanks to your strong willpower? Think again. Look at me: I cycle everywhere. On Wednesdays, I sometimes cycle 28 kilometers to take and pick up my children. This costs me no effort, but not because I know how healthy cycling is. Cycling has become my default because I'm afraid of driving. Your upbringing and all sorts of coincidences have resulted in your norms and habits. So anything you do well is not by definition thanks to your willpower; our willpower is actually not very

strong."

4. We're the plaything of our unconscious choices

"Most of our choices are not made through willpower, but on automatic pilot. You really do have a lot of routines and habits. If you examine them closely, and very consciously try to change them step by step, for example by making healthier choices at fixed recurring moments, you can create healthier routines that will make it easier to resist temptation."

5. We don't have space for it in our mind

Apart from automatic pilot, other factors that gets in the way are our problems, stress, and everyday worries. "A busy family with young children, or recurring financial stress: these are things that make it hard to find space in your mind to change your habits. If you're one of the victims of the childcare benefits scandal, you'll probably find it very difficult to quit smoking. People with a low socio-economic status and chronic stress find it even harder to adopt a healthier lifestyle."

"We have a huge health gap in the Netherlands: people at the bottom of the social ladder not only live an average of six years shorter, but also fifteen years less in good health. Many interventions are ineffective or only exacerbate this gap by reaching only those with enough cognitive space, skills and opportunities. This is why reducing poverty is essential to promote healthy living, as is collaboration between health scientists, behavioral scientists, and policy makers. Luckily, this is happening more and more. It says a lot that as a behavioral scientist I was appointed both at the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences and at the Leiden University Medical Center."

6. Intervening in the environment is imperative

"An important key is making healthy choices easier. The government can help by introducing a sugar tax, but also via less radical adjustments, like nudging: not forcing anything, but making healthy choices easier. You can change people's behavior by subtly making the stairs more visible than the lift, or by placing healthy food at eye level in the canteen. Some people find nudging manipulative and think that it infringes on our autonomy, but the question is whether this is how people experience it in practice. Either way, it's imperative that we use nudging and more radical changes in our environment to counterbalance the temptations surrounding us."

Provided by Leiden University

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