How to take control of your life when you don't feel like it.

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It is a widely held assumption in modern western culture that it is normal to feel good, be inspired, and face life with the energy to fuel your convictions. The absence of these feelings is considered to be a problem requiring attention and remediation. Whether turning to medications, therapy, or the myriad of self-help articles, books or motivational speakers, the goal is clear..."Out with the bad (feelings), and in with the good (feelings)." We are trained to believe that feelings are the basis for what we choose to do or do not do. Our belief in the centrality of feelings begins in childhood. We are taught as children that our feelings are paramount and worthy as reasons for our behavior. "Rebecca, why did you hit Billy?" Rebecca replies, "I **was** ***angry*** when Billy tried to take my toy." "Diana, why are you hiding?" Diana responds, "**I'm** ***scared***." "Douglas, get started on your homework." Douglas answers, "**I don't *feel*** like it. I'll do it later." We are told that anger needs to be managed, anxiety needs to be quieted, depression needs to be lifted, and laziness is a feeling that needs to be overcome. The problem, however, is that feelings are not under our control. They never were and never will be. To make matters worse, we have a paradoxical relationship with feelings. The more we try to control and respond to them, the more they will exert control over us. If you need to be motivated, you won't feel motivated. If you try to be calm, you'll struggle with mounting anxiety. If depression cannot be tolerated, you'll continue to be depressed. If you cannot feel angry, you'll find it hard to ignore your anger. The harder you try, the worse it gets.

Feelings are internally experienced. They can be biologically driven (e.g. hunger or fatigue), or psychologically driven (e.g. fear, anger, or sadness), or sometimes the outcome of both. Studying the evolutionary tree from single cell organisms to humankind, we discover the critical role feelings have played. They offer pre-verbal signals to approach or avoid. Feelings of desire signal an organism to approach food, shelter, sex and safety. Fear, on the other hand, signals danger...fight or flight. The survival value of these gut-level signals were undeniable. They gave our evolutionary ancestors the impetus to move in directions that provided the essentials for life, safety, and the opportunity to propagate future generations.

Feelings, however, are primitive. They can be fallible, fleeting and prone to error. Danger, for example, can be grossly exaggerated prompting unwarranted avoidance, or in other instances, unwarranted aggression. Ungoverned attraction and desire, on the other hand, can prompt dangerous risk-taking and addictive behavior. Eventually, animals developed the ability to learn through experience. Feelings no longer had complete control over behavior. Desire no longer necessitated approach, and fear no longer necessitated flight. Action (behavior) could now be a choice as opposed to a reflex. Although feelings certainly influenced behavior, they could no longer dictate it. So the question arises, why do humans, residing at the apex of the evolutionary chain, still require feelings to initiate important life-affirming actions? The question is even more vexing when we consider the fact that failure is often the result of behavior initiated because of the way we feel. Consider gym attendance as an example. The motivation to exercise after New Year's yields crowded gyms in January and February. These crowds, however, rapidly fade to near empty gyms in March and April. This cycle repeats itself once again as thoughts of summer and swimwear motivate gym attendance in June and July, which inevitably fade as summer gives way to fall. The motivation to exercise rarely leads to a lifestyle of sustained fitness. When decisions to act are based on the way we feel, actions will be as fleeting as the feelings they were based upon. One would think that the consistent failure of feelings-based behavior to improve our lives should be enough to prompt us to question this relationship. Instead, we typically blame ourselves for being weak-willed and not yet ready (in other words, not sufficiently motivated) to make the commitment to change.

How strange it is for humankind to have made the evolutionary journey that started with behavior governed solely by gut feelings, to once again be governed by those same gut feelings. Evolution has given us the capacity to do otherwise. We can choose actions based on our judgment and values. We can select to act despite the absence of feelings-based support. We will always feel what we feel, but our decisions to act should be based on our judgment and values. This is not to suggest that feelings should be ignored and disregarded. When feelings indicate something of actual value (e.g. realistic danger) we need to pay attention and react accordingly. However, when feelings offer nothing of clear value, we will experience them as we must, but then turn our attention to those things that actually matter and commit ourselves to valued action. This is the essence of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT).

First developed by Steven Hayes, Kirk Strosahl and Kelly Wilson in 1999, ACT ushered in what is commonly referred to as the 3rd wave of the Behavior Therapies. Based on operant behavioral research, ACT remarkably mirrors the teaching and wisdom of Buddhism. It does this by recognizing that the essence of human control is not to be found in how we think or feel, but in a commitment to living a valued life. Suffering is no more abnormal than happiness. The full spectrum of feelings, thoughts, memories and perceptions are a part of the tapestry of human experience. The goal is to be experientially open to all that we feel and perceive while at the same time being committed to acting in ways that reflect our values. Values reflect our sense of who we are and what we strive to be. How, or what we feel should not be relevant to what we choose to do. Ironically, it is when we no longer monitor and concern ourselves with how we feel that we begin to feel empowered. Success in life is not the result of feeling motivated but rather the result of committed action that is undertaken and sustained because of the value it reflects. Choose to exercise because it is important for your health and well-being. Continue to exercise because that value remains unchanged. Taking ownership of that commitment is the only way to create a successful outcome. Feelings are ephemeral. Their presence should be irrelevant if meaningful change is the goal.

So, to return to the question, why are we so vulnerable to feelings-based decision-making when the outcomes of this relationship are so consistently poor? The answer is clear: feelings are seductive. They draw you to serve their needs. Anxiety presses you to avoid. Depression encourages you to withdraw. Hunger drives you to eat. Exhaustion drives you to sleep. Motivation drives you to act. As is obvious from these examples, feelings sometimes represent biological needs while others represent our relationship to the environment we live in. What all feelings have in common is the seductive force they exert to satisfy their needs. We are drawn to behave in ways that reflect the way we feel. "Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny" was a phrase first coined by the German biologist and philosopher Ernst Haeckel. It was applied to the development of the embryo as it passes through stages that reflect the evolutionary history of the species. Although no longer considered an accurate model of embryonic development, the observation that human development broadly reflects our evolutionary past is not without merit. Infant development is an interaction between the child's biological make-up and the environment he/she is in. Behaviorally, infants begin life by simply responding to felt needs. As children grow, they develop the capacity to learn and modify their behavior. Experience in their environment, especially with their caretakers, helps them learn to respond to external as well as internal cues. It can be said that psychological maturation is essentially a journey from behavior that is feelings-based to behavior that is values-based. This journey extends from infancy to adulthood. Many of us stumble badly along the way. Blame is often ascribed to our past. Parents who were too indulgent, or parents who were too severe. Sometimes it was an environment that was harsh and oppressive. Sometimes it was an environment that was too forgiving and not challenging enough. In the end, these explanations offer nothing with regards to how to effectuate change.

The capacity to do better resides in all of us. It starts with a decision followed by a commitment. At first it feels as if you are swimming against a tide...and you are. It is a resistance based on a history of relying on the way you feel to justify what you do. Although there will be times when feelings and values will be congruent with one another, often, they will diverge. The commitment to do what makes sense (values-driven choices) needs to be made without reference to the way you feel. The Nike sneaker tagline, "Just do it" is surprisingly profound. Success in any important endeavor is an outcome derived from the willingness to accept and be present in all that we experience, but to choose to act in ways that confirm the values that that define who you are. Surprising as it may seem, once choosing to do what makes sense (values-based behavior) becomes a habit, and the way you feel becomes irrelevant, the motivation (feelings) to do what you need to do begins to emerge.