

# swimming blind

*the science of habits*

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ALIVE!

**FOR** Michael Phelps, the morning was like many others. Though a race-day, he fell into a routine that had become automatic. He ate the same breakfast he always ate, did the same stretching routine he always did. He swam his typical sequence of warm-up laps. He had already won three gold medals that week at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Today, however, his calm in the midst of intense pressure would be further tested.

Minutes before the race, he fell into his customary pattern— bouncing slightly on his toes, stepping on and off the block, swinging his arms three times. Then the gun sounded. He began swimming the 200-meter butterfly, but something was wrong. Moisture was collecting inside his goggles. Everything became blurry. Soon the goggles filled completely with water. No longer can he see the lines on the bottom of the pool, guiding his direction, or

the movements of his competitors, or how close he is to the wall in front of him. He is swimming blind.

It is in just such moments, when sensory input is confusing and muddled that the brain kicks into habitual responses. In this case, Phelps reverted to what he had learned through years of training, including how to relax and respond in stressful situations.

His coach, Bob Bowman, had helped Phelps know how to handle life stress, which spilled over into athletic performance. Phelps was prepared for emergencies. In training, Bowman had trained Phelps to swim in the dark: turning off the lights at the pool, wearing blacked out goggles, and swimming the perfect race in his mind.

Every night, in the dark, Phelps imagined the perfect race, how many strokes, what his body would do, where the wall was, how he would finish.

Phelps had rehearsed how he would respond to goggle failure. Habits that had been developed took over when other supports failed.

Bowman had done more than train Phelps in swimming technique, he had zeroed in on a few key habits that established a mindset enabling him to swim his laps, kick off the wall, estimate

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how many strokes it would take to finish, and glide in with outstretched arm, timing everything perfectly and all while not being able to see. Not only did Phelps win yet another gold medal, but he beat the world record.

Research on habits has shown that developing a significant key habit often spills over into other parts of life. One good habit developed or one bad habit broken sets off a signal for positive change in other areas. These are thought of as keystone habits. A keystone is the stone or brick at the central topmost point of an arch that locks the other rocks or bricks into place. It is something on which other interrelated things depend. A keystone habit may not be obvious at first glance, but a specific discipline or strength can spur on positive qualities elsewhere.

It can be quite overwhelming to look at oneself and assess everything that needs to be changed. It is a long



list. I should exercise, lose weight, avoid snacking, stop smoking, stick to the budget, have a better attitude, not be impatient, have meals on time, study harder, think the best of others, smile at fellow employees, make time for the kids, stop worrying, work less, work more, etc., etc. Throwing the kitchen sink at ourselves, or others,

**ONE GOOD HABIT DEVELOPED OR ONE BAD HABIT BROKEN SETS OFF A SIGNAL FOR POSITIVE CHANGE IN OTHER AREAS.**

tends to crush us. We become even less inspired. Non-compliant, unmotivated, and resistant are words commonly written on patient charts. Health care providers have struggled to effectively help clients make needed changes. Rather than tackling them all, the thought behind the keystone habit is that tackling one “can cause widespread shifts.”<sup>1</sup> Coming in through a back door rather than fighting the beastly habit head on can be a successful approach in some situations. For example, the simple act of eating with the family and making your bed every morning have been found to be keystone habits that fuel better homework skills, greater emotional control, and greater ability to stick with a budget.

Exercise has been found to be a powerful keystone habit for many. James Prochanska PhD, of the University of Rhode Island, says, “Exercise spills over. There’s something about it that makes other good habits easier.”<sup>2</sup> For many, exercise behaves as a catalyst, propelling other good habits into action. Prochanska’s father died of alcoholism leaving Prochanska with a desire to understand how change can occur in an

individual’s life. His observations and research led him to develop six stages of change enabling people to identify where they are stuck and what could propel them to the next step. The mindset required to take the next step is a small win. And experiencing a successful change in one area can be contagious, in the mind as well as in our actions,

helping us to take the next step.

Seemingly small or unrelated actions either develop qualities required for larger

changes to occur or can be in some way related. “It is by *small things* that our characters are formed to habits of integrity. . . . The mind must be *trained* through daily tests to habits of fidelity. . . . They are loyal because they have *trained themselves to habits* of faithfulness and truth. By being faithful in that which is least, it becomes easy for them, through *acquired power*, to be faithful in greater matters.”<sup>3</sup> Power is acquired through training in the seemingly small things. This training is intentional. “Leave a field uncultivated, and it will grow up to thorns and briars. You will never see a lovely flower or a choice shrub peering above the unsightly, poisonous weeds. The worthless bramble will grow luxuriantly without thought or care, while plants that are valued for use or beauty require thorough culture. Thus it is with our youth. If right habits are formed, and right principles established, there is earnest work to be done. If wrong habits are corrected, diligence and perseverance are required to accomplish the task.”<sup>4</sup>

When you think about it, our life is a mass of physical, emotional, social, and intellectual habits. Some have

developed through either neglect or opportunity at some point in our lives. Others have been acquired through painstaking training and diligent repetition. God created man with the freedom to make choices and decisions that when repeated would become habit that would form character, which would in turn influence our happiness and health, and ultimately determine our destiny. Thankfully we are not left alone to this task of assessing, overcoming, or developing. He has promised an Enlightener, a Comforter, a Trainer.

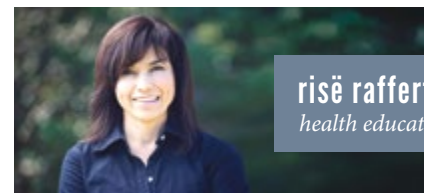
As Bob Bowman knew what it would take for Michael Phelps to be a champion, so too does the Holy Spirit know what it will take for you and me to develop habits of thought and action that will shape our characters and enable us to win the imperishable prize infinitely more precious than a gold medal.

<sup>1</sup> Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*, Random House, 2012, p. 109.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ellen White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 22 [emphasis supplied].

<sup>4</sup> Ellen White, *Sons & Daughters of God*, Review & Herald, p. 333.



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