

This is an exposure draft of *How to Change the World* by Les Robinson

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Chapter 3

The social immune system

Why tell, sell, and threaten rarely work.

Fear of Salsa

If you've ever run a training workshop you'll know the post-lunch pit of doom. It's when students' brains seem to liquefy following the (apparently) exhausting effort of digesting those tiny savory sandwiches. The trainer feels he has entered the twilight zone of a zombie movie. Rows of lifeless "Dawn of the Dead" faces peer back with empty "Do-we-have-to-be-here?" eyes.

It's time for an energiser. The trainer invites his undead students to rise to their feet for some playful physical activity designed to jolt them out of their death-like trance.

Usually it's not so hard. As long as it doesn't involve mental effort, most students will willingly rise to the challenge of jumping around a bit after lunch.

But not always. Once, while teaching a class of adult educators in Perth, my invitation to be energised met with total, intransigent rebellion.

During the morning introductions it had emerged that the tallest, most glamorous woman in the class was a Salsa instructor. "Ah ha" I thought "I feel a little after-lunch Salsa coming on".

When the pit of doom arrived, I invited her to lead the class in a few Salsa steps. Being extremely fit, she still had plenty of energy and strode leggily onto the floor. I asked her to demonstrate a couple of steps. She looked good. I joined her. I didn't look good. Then I invited the class to join us. They froze in their seats. I repeated the invitation. Nothing but blank stares. "It's easy", I coaxed, "just stand up and take two steps forward and two steps back, like this", with a wiggle of the hips.

Not a blink or twitch. A room full of intelligent, competent adults had switched from easy-going compliance to truculent insurrection. In the end I was forced to give in and invite them do a game that involved a lot of running around and dodging into each other. That was OK. Salsa wasn't.

What was going on? I think it was a perfect illustration of the comfy zone at work. Doing the Salsa in public, it seems, is way outside most people's comfort zones. It's located, quite firmly, in their scary zones.

Comfort zones aren't really places, they're sets of behaviours that are predictably going to not get people into trouble. People love their comfy zones precisely because they feel safe and certain. What lies outside the comfort zone? A scary wilderness of potential embarrassment, humiliation, rejection, social annihilation, not to mention bother, lost time, cost, injury, pain, uncertainty and anxiety. The scary zone is scary because it involves change, and

even small changes can be frightening to those who have yet to do them.

Of course, what also lies outside the comfort zone is hope: the possibility of bettering oneself. Most people intuitively know this and so the scary zone has a dread fascination. At it's best and worst, it's is a dizzying swirl of hope and fear where exultation and terror intermingle dangerously. They may dream of going there, but most of the time they prefer to stick with behaviours that are tried and safe.

Arrogantly, those of us who can already dance the Salsa (or don't care what others think about them), tend to discount the fear involved in even this simple act of change.

Humiliation

It could just be me, but I suspect that of all the terrors that lurk in the scary zone, humiliation might be the worst.

"To be humiliated is to be placed, against your will...and often in a deeply hurtful way, in a situation that is greatly inferior to what you feel you should expect. Humiliation entails demeaning treatment that transgresses established expectations...one of the defining characteristics of humiliation...is that the victim is forced into passivity, acted upon, made helpless," wrote Evelin Lindner of the University of Oslo in her intimate study of the Rwandan genocide.¹

Humiliation is a multi-headed beast. It involves loss of control, damaged self-image, and awful feelings of rejection.

Humiliation is hurtful because it damages *the sense of self*. Cruel looks, words or actions (or our own bumbling) make us out to be weaker, dumber, plainer, less astute and more inept etc. than we believe ourselves to be.

For some reason psychologists haven't bothered to explore humiliation, but they have studied rejection, which is part of humiliation. Brain scans show that rejection lights up the same regions of the brain as physical pain.² The pain of rejection, however, can be worse. People easily forget physical pain, but the pain of rejection can last a lifetime, hurting as freshly as if it occurred yesterday.

Rejection corrodes our sense of self because social connections provide day-to-day affirmation of who we are. How do we know we are good, attractive, loved, popular, smart, creative, or cool? It is others' opinions, words and responses that give us the social proof that we are who we imagine ourselves to be. Without that affirmation, identity can disintegrate.

As identity fragments, so does behaviour. In experiments over many years, Roy Baumeister of Florida State University and his colleagues showed that rejected individuals have less self-regulation, less problem-solving ability,³ more aggression,⁴ and more self-defeating activity than connected individuals. Rejected people tend to make fewer healthy choices and more unhealthy choices, and they have a greater tendency to give up when faced with frustration.⁵

Studies have shown that men without meaningful close relationships are more likely to be arrested for speeding and be involved in car accidents, especially those involving alcohol. Single

women are more likely to abuse alcohol and drugs. Individuals suffering from the social pain of grief or loss are more likely to die from risky behaviour including accidents and alcohol abuse.⁶ A study of over 12,000 adolescents by Michael Resnick and his colleagues found that connectedness was the single biggest factor protecting adolescents from violence.⁷

Kip Williams, Professor of Psychology at Macquarie University, New South Wales, says that social rejection deprives people of four basic needs: a sense of belonging, control over their lives, self-esteem, and purpose of existence. Prolonged social exclusion, he says, can lead to depression, suicide, association with anti-social fringe groups, and, rarely, mass killings such as the Columbine High School massacre in 1999.⁸ A 2004 analysis showed that 13 of 15 recent killings in American schools were carried out by adolescent males who had experienced repeated social exclusion.

On the scale of nations, humiliation and fear of humiliation are associated with atrocities and civil wars. The Arab-Israeli conflict, the Chechen Wars, riots by alienated Muslim youths in France, and the breakdown of civil order in Kenya are cases in point. Humiliation is a big factor in the psychology of genocide. Evelin Lindner, in her cross-cultural study of genocides, noted that "it was the fear of imagined future destitution and humiliating subjugation of one group at the hands of another" that formed the justification for genocidal killings in Rwanda, Somalia and Nazi Germany.⁹

Not to put too fine a point on it, the fear of humiliation puts humans in a bad place.

The fear of humiliation is not just something that happens during civil wars, schoolyard bullying and racial discrimination. If, like me,

you're a keen fan of *Funniest Home Videos* or similar programs, you'll be aware that each of us hovers only an inch away from humiliation as we go about our daily lives. And it is precisely the unfamiliar activities, like Salsa dancing, that are most likely to cause us to lose control and reveal our ineptitude and inferiority.

The potential for humiliation, along with a host of other fears, costs and unwelcome bothers, is present whenever someone faces a decision to adopt a new behaviour, even a simple, benign behaviour like volunteering, going to the gym, starting a garden, cutting down on alcohol or fatty foods, or picking up their doggy-doo.

Take the decision to quit smoking. Quitting not only involves the emotional and physical anguish of giving up an addiction but the threat of social rejection. A study of young smokers in New York City observed that:

"youth had to cope with temptation, frequent and often intense urges or cravings for cigarettes, and lack of social support from their family and friends. The young participants not only had to cope with general life stresses without being able to use cigarettes to reduce tensions but also had to contend with new stressful situations, such as friends who put them down for not smoking. In addition, the teens had to give up things that were important to them, such as friendships, during their quit attempts."¹⁰

Put simply: change can be scary and hard. Change agents miss something vital when they discount the fears, costs, difficulties and potential humiliations people face when contemplating change in their lives.

Wasted advice

In 1984 the United States Congress passed laws encouraging the states to raise the legal drinking age to 21 years. Under-age drinking did indeed change as states began to comply with the laws, but not in the way they expected. Before the laws came into force, it was clear that alcohol consumption tended to increase gradually with age. Following the laws, however, numerous studies showed that under-21s began to drink more heavily than over-21s. Their alcohol consumption increased, binge drinking increased, and DUI arrests increased for 18-21 year olds while there were no similar increases for 21-23 year olds.¹¹

One large study of students at 56 colleges in 1987 found that 24 percent of under-21 students were heavy drinkers, compared to 15 percent over-21 students. This pattern was in complete contrast to patterns extending back to the early 1950s. The researchers concluded that raising the minimum legal purchasing age did not reduce underage drinking. "In fact, the legislation may actually have contributed to increased drinking among underage students".

¹²

This example is one of scores that illustrate how attempts to influence people's behaviour can boomerang, producing precisely the opposite results.

It turns out that we humans are manufactured with a special feature – standard in all models – that protects us against attempts by other people to drag us out of our comfy zones. It's a kind of social immune system which produces two powerful immune responses: denial and resistance.

Denial is a state where people turn a blind eye to information that threatens their identity or interests. They decide “it’s not my problem” or “I can’t stop it” or “it won’t make any difference anyway” and continue their current behaviour, often concocting elaborate arguments to convince themselves there’s no need to act.

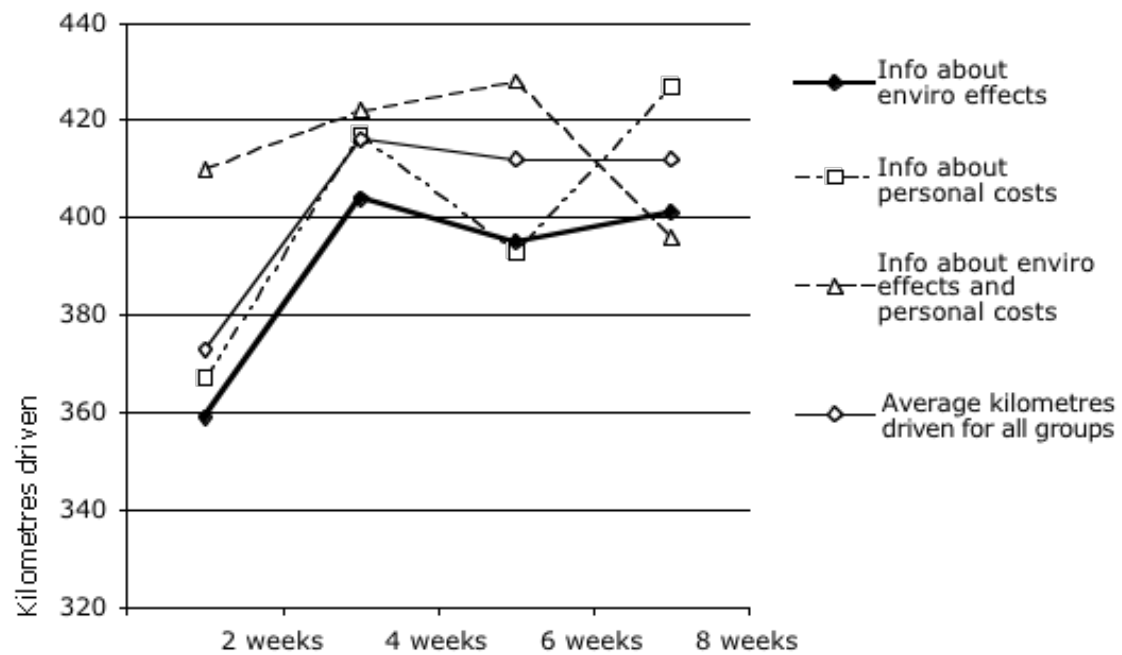
Resistance is a more active state. It involves purposefully rebellious behaviour. It occurs whenever people feel their familiar behaviours are actively threatened. They reassert their right to continue those behaviours by doing them more often, with greater energy, commitment, zest and enjoyment than before.

A nice illustration of resistance and denial comes from an experiment in the Dutch city of Gouda.¹³

350 regular drivers in Gouda, Netherlands, were randomly selected to participate in a study “to gain better insight into transportation behaviour”. Gouda is a city with excellent bikeways and public transport, and the goal was to see if specially tailored personal information could encourage drivers to reduce their car use.

The participants were assigned to three groups that were given different combinations of information about the negative effects of car use (see diagram). They were visited every two weeks by a research assistant who discussed the consequences of their car use. They were also given diaries to monitor their car use.

The experiment lasted eight weeks. Here are the results:



E = Info about environmental effects of car use

C = Info about personal costs of care use

EC = Both

M = The average km per week for all groups

The boomerang effect. Source: Tertoolen et al (1998)

As you can see, the information tended to cause all three groups to drive their cars *further*.

Intriguingly, the study also revealed that the drivers with high environmental awareness before the experiment had *less* environmental awareness afterwards.

What could these results mean?

According to the authors, it was a textbook case of denial and resistance. Car users, they concluded, love their cars and hate to be pressured into using them less. Cars are the pre-eminent symbol of personal freedom in modern society, so it's not surprising that threats to their enjoyment meet with resistance.

The reduced environmental awareness of “green” drivers was also an example of denial. Being green and being brought face-to-face with the real-life data on their own car use set up a dissonance between attitudes and behaviour. Something had to give, and wasn’t the behaviour. The green drivers reacted by becoming less green because it was the easiest way to feel better about themselves.

Denial and resistance explain why “tell” and “sell” strategies fail to get results as advertised and often produce boomerang effects where the targeted behaviour gets worse.

Professionals who design such “tell” and “sell” programs aren’t immune from denial too when it comes to judging the effectiveness of their programs. Just how stupendously they’ve been in denial has become visible in recent years with the arrival of a new form of evaluation: the systematic review.*

Rigorous evaluation, scandalously, has been a rarity in most fields of behaviour change – except health promotion. Health promoters have been carrying out program evaluations for decades, and there’s now a huge body of published data about the effectiveness of various health education efforts. In recent years independent statisticians have begun to pour over this data and subject it to rigorous analysis. The result is a growing body of systematic reviews which allow us to make judgements about the merit of various strategies.

The results are grim news for anyone advocating “tell” or “sell” approaches to behaviour change.

* Also called meta-reviews, meta-evaluations, or reviews-of-reviews.

In 2002, for instance, a group of medical researchers at McMasters University, Canada analysed twenty-six evaluations of sex education programs targeted at adolescents.¹⁴

They found the programs “did not delay initiation of sexual intercourse in young women or young men; did not improve use of birth control...and did not reduce pregnancy rates in young women. Four abstinence programs and one school based sex education program were associated with an increase in number of pregnancies among partners of young male participants.”

Mmmm.

A four year study of one thousand US adults attempting to quit smoking found a dramatic disconnect between knowledge and behaviour: “those who perceived more benefits from cessation at the beginning of the cessation attempt were more likely to have relapsed by twelve months as compared to those who expected fewer benefits. The findings were opposite to our predictions. Not only were the results humiliating, they were irrational,” wrote the perplexed researchers.¹⁵

In 2004 a group of British researchers examined 144 anti-smoking programs targeting young people in the USA, UK and Finland.¹⁶ They found little evidence of success except for a minority of programs that involved peer support or “social learning” interventions.[†]

A 2002 review compared fifty-six anti-drinking programs from around the world aimed at under 25 year olds. They found thirty-six

[†] We'll talk more about social learning later. It's a promising approach.

had detectable effects on drinking behaviours but the effects had evaporated in less than twelve months. Four of the programs actually seemed to increase drinking behaviour. Only three showed evidence of changes lasting up to three years.¹⁷

In 2002 the Scottish Executive commissioned a world-wide review of the effectiveness of mass media alcohol education campaigns. The programs, the review concluded, raised people's knowledge about alcohol but had virtually no impact on their behaviour. "The balance of evidence suggests mass media educational campaigns on their own have...no impact on drinking behaviour."¹⁸

Drug education programs fared no better. A 1998 review examined sixty-two drug education programs targeting people aged eight to twenty-five years, mainly in the USA. They found only eighteen showed evidence of change in drug use, but "the impact...was small with dissipation of program gains over time." The average effect of the programs was equivalent to just 3.7 percent of participants delaying taking up drugs or never using them.¹⁹

A 2007 study of thirteen HIV education programs based on sexual abstinence involving 15,940 US youths found none reduced the incidence of unprotected sex, number of partners, condom use, or age of starting sex.²⁰ The researchers concluded that programs "that exclusively encourage abstinence from sex do not seem to affect the risk of HIV infection in high income countries".

A 2002 review of nutrition programs came to an equally dispiriting conclusion. Putting a brave face on it, the researcher concluded that "nutrition knowledge is a necessary but not sufficient factor for changes in consumers' food behaviours...A brief survey of the recent literature shows that the evidence for the influence of nutrition

knowledge on food behaviours is mixed."²¹

A 2007 review of evaluations of fifty-seven nutrition education programs targeting school children found "mostly failure. Just four showed any real success in changing the way kids eat or any promise as weapons against the growing epidemic of childhood obesity." "Any person looking at the published literature about these programs would have to conclude that they are generally not working," wrote Dr. Tom Baranowski, a pediatrics professor at Houston's Baylor College of Medicine who studies behavioral nutrition.²²

Even in the face of serious and imminent threats to their health, people still seem remarkably resistant to facts.

A 1996 New Zealand study of asthma sufferers found that few would use peak flow meters or use emergency services during an asthma attack. The disappointed researchers concluded "For many of us who place education at the highest priority, it is difficult concept to accept that the acquisition of knowledge is not necessarily followed by the initiation of appropriate action. The access to knowledge...about a disease such as asthma should not be assumed to translate into changes in behavioral practices, even if these actions would be of direct benefit to the involved persons."²³

A 2005 study of 5500 heart patients in fifteen European Countries found that 59 percent of those aged under fifty kept smoking, despite being given personal advice to stop. Wilma Scholte op Reimer, lead author of the study, described the finding as "unbelievable." "It makes me wonder if they are truly aware of the risk that they are taking," she said.²⁴

In 2004 Australian road safety researchers drew a similar chastening conclusion: "One of the disturbing problems with speeding is that while most people accept that speeding increases crash risk, most people continue to speed. Researchers have found that most campaigns are more successful in conveying information and changing attitudes than in altering behaviour."²⁵

I could go on, but you get the message.

Systematic reviews are rare in fields like climate change, water conservation, sustainable farm management and so on, but my hunch is we'd see similar results. The conclusion is that programs that aim to inform people how they should behave rarely have positive effects on behaviour.

Systematic reviews of thousands of evaluated educational efforts reveal an ordinary truth: we humans don't like being given unsolicited advice about how we should behave. We have a powerful immune system that protects us from just such attempts to influence our behaviour. That system has two powerful immune responses: denial and resistance.

The social immune system: Denial

Back in the 1950s a young Californian psychologist named Leon Festinger was hired by the Behavioural Sciences Division of the Ford Foundation to audit all published knowledge about communication and social influence. Not surprisingly he soon found ways to avoid this onerous task. Instead he developed a fascination with a perplexing problem.

After the disastrous Indian earthquake of 1934 rumours spread amongst the survivors of an even more horrible earthquake to come. Why, he wondered, would traumatised people willingly believe a rumour that had the effect of increasing their anxiety? Eventually he realised that the answer might not be that the rumour was anxiety provoking, but that it was anxiety *justifying*. He was on the way to developing one of the most influential theories in psychology.

His theory sought to explain what happens when there is an inconsistency between what people know and what they do. This inconsistency, he said, causes psychological discomfort. The term "psychological discomfort", as Festinger used it, was a catch-all for feelings of frustration, guilt, unease, anguish, disgust or emotional pain. All these feelings are processed in a deep brain structure called the *insular cortex* which, interestingly, is also involved with bodily representation or self-image.

According to Festinger, people respond to this psychological pain in one of two ways. They either change their behaviour, or they avoid situations or information that reminds them of the inconsistency.²⁶ Since behaviour is often hard to change, people tend to modify their beliefs, attitudes and sources of information to avoid the discomfort. They do this quite unconsciously and automatically. It's exactly as J. K. Galbraith's said it: "Faced with the choice between changing one's mind and proving there is no need to do so, almost everyone gets busy on the proof."

Festinger called his theory "cognitive dissonance", but an easier-to-get name would be "denial theory".

One of Festinger's most interesting studies involved a UFO cult. The cult consisted of about twenty-five middle class followers of a suburban housewife who prophesied that a great flood would sweep away civilisation at midnight on a certain day in 1956. Only her small group of believers would be rescued by a flying saucer.

The night of the predicted flood arrived and the group gathered in the home of their leader to await the alien rescuers. Unfortunately neither flood nor flying saucer materialised. From midnight to almost five o'clock the group struggled to find an explanation. Then, at 4.45 am the woman received a message from God saying that He had saved the world because of the light and strength of the group. The group accepted her message and from that moment they became devoted advocates of the new belief. Moreover, they completely transformed the character of their cult, abandoning their previous secretive existence, and embarking on a very public media campaign to obtain new adherents.

Festinger's explanation is that the group suffered huge dissonance – psychological discomfort - when the prophesy failed. They then had two choices, either give up their beliefs and dissolve the group, or invent a new justification to continue their existence. Rather than lose the social support of their tight knit group, they grasped at the new justification for continuing the life of their cult. What's more, they embarked on an uncharacteristically aggressive media campaign to obtain new adherents. Festinger believed the high dissonance drove them to carry out that energetic publicity campaign to justify the rightness of their new belief.

The point of Festinger's theory was that the UFO cult members were not freaks. Their behaviour was quite normal. They liked belonging to their group and wanted to avoid change at all costs. When faced

with a personal threat they eagerly grasped whatever argument would help avoid unpleasant truths, and then overjustified their behaviour with extravagant assertions of righteousness. It all sounds very familiar.

Festinger's theory was very controversial at the time. It challenged conventional wisdoms about human behaviour. Battalions of psychologists lined up to criticise it. There have been hundreds of experiments designed to either disprove it or understand it. The current consensus amongst psychologists seems to be that dissonance, at its core, is about challenges to people's identity or self-concept. We humans are at our most defensive when we feel our sense of self is under attack. The psychologist Elliot Aronson said that most people have favourable views of themselves: they want to see themselves as a) competent; b) moral; and c) able to predict their own behaviour.²⁷ When they're given evidence that shows them in a negative light or points to inconsistent behaviour, dissonance and denial are the result.

Festinger's theory helps explain why inconvenient truths tend to have so little effect on behaviour. People reject them because they challenge their identity, causing something close to physical pain. The quickest and easiest way to reduce that pain is to deny the inconsistency and avoid information that reminds them about it.

You can see this in the fact that those who work hardest to deny the need for change are usually the ones who need it the most. Heavy drinkers, for instance, are far more vociferous in their rejection of information about the negative effects of alcohol than light drinkers.²⁸ †

† Interestingly, economists have their own take on this phenomenon. They call it the "sunk costs" effect. People make investments in certain courses of action, and

When a person's status quo is challenged, their instinct is to defend it. Human beings' marvellous ability as story tellers means we are superbly equipped to rationalise our current behaviours, hence protecting our comfy zones from the kind of bad news delivered by well-meaning educators.

Educational campaigns that offer unsolicited advice about behaviour therefore force people to invent counter-arguments. And the more people argue for a position, the firmer position becomes. As psychotherapists William Miller and Steven Rollnick explain, that is exactly the reverse of what change agents should be doing "It is the client who should be voicing the arguments for change. When you find yourself in the role of arguing for change while your client (patient, student, child) is voicing arguments against it, you're in precisely the wrong role."²⁹

As Leon Festinger found in later experiments, the tendency to ignore inconvenient truths is even stronger when acting on them might be socially humiliating.³⁰ If our friends get used to us behaving a certain way, then there are social costs in being different. The fear of embarrassment or rejection can make it even harder to invest time and effort in making a personal change.

Denial is the only first weapon in the armory of our social immune system. The second one is even more powerful.

may defend those investments to the point of absurdity, even when the prospective gains outweigh the benefits. "Loss aversion" is the psychological principle that explains this effect: we all have a natural tendency to overestimate potential losses compared to potential gains.[‡]

The social immune system: Resistance

Have you seen Supernanny on TV? What! No? Have you been living under a rock?

Supernanny is the vastly popular reality TV show about toddler taming where out-of-control children are civilized by the loving use of threats and punishments.

Each episode follows a similar format. It starts with a fly-on-the-wall view of a middle class American family where chaos rules. There is a teary exasperated mum and a disengaged dad and a blur of hideously misbehaving children aged between two and eight.

These kids are not just non-compliant. They are monsters. They throw tantrums, assault siblings, bite parents, smash toys. They are masters of emotional tyranny and use their skills to manipulate their parents into supplying torrents of sweets and junk food that drive them into even more frenzied exhibitions of savagery. These children are so ruthlessly disobedient and self-interested that you just want to reach inside your TV and strangle their little necks. But Supernanny shows us a better way.

Supernanny is Jo Frost, a real English nanny with a posh accent and a steely resolve. She arrives in a London taxi, introduces herself and promptly humiliates the parents by forcing them to watch a video of the wreckage of their family life. The shaken adults promise to follow her instructions and the fun begins.

Jo follows the family around for a day uttering gasps of horror and theatrical looks of disgust. Then she gets down to business. A family meeting is called. Everyone gathers around a big chart in the

kitchen. Jo has made a strict schedule of daily activities and a list of house rules. She patiently explains how everything is going to change. The parents are skeptical, but the kids are bug-eyed with the sort of “uh-oh” awareness that suggests their know their days of omnipotence are numbered.

Jo explains that from now on there will be consequences for breaking the rules, to wit, timeout in a “naughty spot”. The naughty spot is a lonely corner devoid of amusement. The parents, meanwhile, have responsibilities. They must enforce the rules in a special way. When bad behaviour occurs they must issue a single clear warning. They must crouch down to the child’s eye level and, without using physical intimidation, calmly explain that repeated bad behaviour will incur the naughty spot. To be released from the naughty spot the child must apologise for their actions. And the apology must be rewarded with a warm hug.

A magnificent contest of wills ensues. Little Cynthia wacks Johnny. Off she goes to the naughty spot. He kicks her Barbie American Idol Doll. Off he goes. There are dizzying tantrums. We see Johnny or Cynthia fidgeting in the naughty spot, their little faces squeezed in a Stalag 17-style “you’ll never break me” mask of determination.

Meanwhile the parents are not only battling with their offspring but with their own souls. Will their hearts be shattered by the anguished tears and theatrical moans of little Sonia and James? Will they have Supernanny’s iron will to endure?

The mighty soap opera teeters back and forth, before finally, the contest subsides. The kids seem to have figured something out: resistance is futile, compliance is surprisingly painless and brings rewards.

The show invariably ends with a touching scene. Jo is departing. The parents are tearful. They say “thank you Supernanny, you’ve given us our family back” or words to that effect. Supernanny offers a final admonition to stick to the rules. Meanwhile the children – and here’s what’s remarkable – seem calm, content and apparently quite happy. Maybe they’re just relieved the power-tripping English lady is going so they can get back to being the Sopranos. But I think the transformation is too complete to be just theatre. Even though it’s only a TV show, something dramatic has happened. You can guess that the war against chaos is far from over, but this family have been altered by the thoughtful use of threats and punishments.

I can tell you I’m addicted to this morality play of torment and redemption. I guess there are some families that are so dysfunctional that even Supernanny’s iron determination cannot mend them. I suppose their reels end up in the bin. But for the families we get to see, the transformations are striking.

Supernanny looks like a demonstration of the civilizing power of appropriate threats and punishments. Her system seems to work like this:

- there are specific, agreed rules, permanently visible on the kitchen wall;
- the rules are for the common good, not just the convenience of the parents;
- physical intimidation is avoided: the adults crouch down to the child’s eye level and issue calm, firm warnings before

punishment is applied;

- punishment is immediate;
- punishment is real, not just a threat;
- punishment matters to the child (loss of social interaction and activity);
- punishment relates to breaking a specific rule, it's not casual or random;
- punishment is repeated consistently until compliance occurs;
- there are rewards for compliance.

These seem to be the Supernanny principles. Not surprisingly they concur with what psychologists have figured out in innumerable experiments with animals, children and adults. The same principles are well established to control classroom behaviour (just Google "child behaviour modification"). There's plenty of evidence they work.³¹

But now let's change the scale. What happens when threats and punishments are taken out of relatively controllable environments like homes and classrooms and applied to free range populations living in wider society?

The United States' War on Drugs could be a good one to look at. It's a forty year old program involving the systematic use of threats and punishments to reduce illegal drug-taking across a whole

population. It's scope is enormous, with annual expenditures averaging \$12.5 billion.³²

The use of threats and punishments has been intense. In 2003, the latest year I could find statistics, there were over 352,000 drug offenders in state and federal prisons, something like a quarter of all inmates.³³ One of the social effects of these laws has been to create what Clinton's drug czar, General Barry McCafferty, in a candid moment, called "an American gulag."³⁴

The War of Drugs is clearly not very successful. A 2005 Rand Corporation study concluded that the previous decade was one in which "youth drug initiation actually increased and heroin and cocaine dependence declined only modestly".³⁵

As a psychological case study the War on Drugs is, however, far too messy for my purposes, tangled up as it is in race, ghettoisation and the perpetuation of a "crime industry".

Instead I found a neater example. A short, discrete, society-wide program of threats and punishments that aimed to achieve a social good, in this case, getting people into jobs.

In the late 1990s the Australian government carried out an accidental experiment that illuminated the effectiveness of threats and punishments as tools for changing people's behavior on a society-wide scale.

The Federal government at that time believed unemployment payments were a privilege not a right. Government ministers were especially incensed at the number of "cruising dole blunders", people who were said to be completely uninterested in working. So

the government decreed that unemployed people must prove they were actively looking for work or suffer loss of payments. The arrangement was called "mutual obligation".

The employment minister coined the term "embuggerance" to describe the government's new approach to encourage long term unemployed to look for work. It's a military term for making someone's life a torment.³⁶

At the time there were about 386,600 who'd been receiving benefits for more than twelve months.³⁷ They were to be the prime targets of embuggerance. The main tool was partial or complete suspension of benefits, known as "breaching".

The most common cause for breaching was failure to do specified job search activities. For instance, every unemployed person was supposed to approach ten employers each fortnight to ask for work. They were expected to keep a job search diary, transfer the details onto a form, and present the form fortnightly to the government agency. Failure to complete the diary, missing official appointments, or not failing obeying instructions could result in loss of benefits.

From 1996 to 2001 the government engaged in a veritable frenzy of breaching. The scale of the campaign was breathtaking. The number of breaches more than quadrupled, reaching 387,000 per year. Many of these were multiple breaches. Amazingly, some 200,000 individuals were punished for behavioural infringements in a single year.³⁸

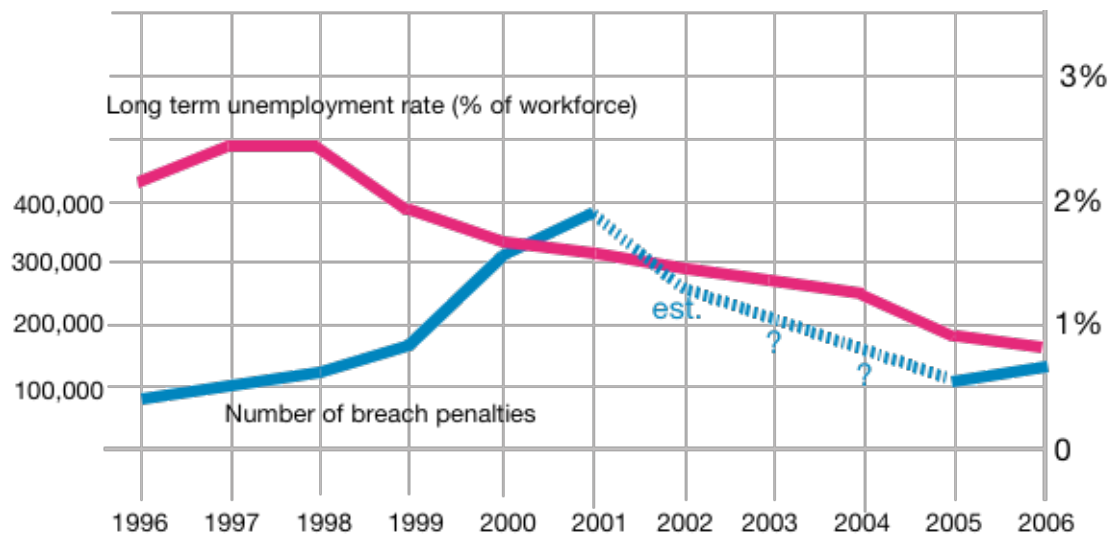
By 2001 welfare activist groups became alarmed at the high level of breaching. They got hold of national breaching statistics through a Freedom of Information search. The figures caused public outrage

and led to a campaign by church and welfare groups. Embarrassed, the government drastically cut back on breaching, admitting that breaching “could be too harsh on vulnerable people”.³⁹ Breaching rates then fell back to their original level.

There are at least two ways to look at this extraordinary spiking and reversal of breaching rates. You could see it a savage neo-conservative assault on the weak, or you could look on it as an illuminating society-wide experiment in social change. Putting aside moral qualms, let’s ask: Did it work? Did this society-wide program of threats and punishment alter people’s behaviour in the intended direction?

Remember, the primary reason for “embuggerance” was to drive the jobless into job-seeking activity. If pursued with genuine diligence the result should logically have been more long term unemployed people shifting into jobs. So did this extraordinary administrative effort and the pain inflicted on so many people produce the desired results?

The graph below compares the breaching rate with the long term unemployment rate (i.e. people unemployed for 12 months or more) during the relevant period.



Sources: Breach statistics 1997-2001: Sydney Welfare Rights Centre and Australian Council for Social service figures cited in Schooneveldt S. (2004) Do Mutual Obligation Breach Penalties Coerce Compliance with Government Expectations? *Australian Journal of Social Issues* Vol 39(2)

Breach statistics 2004-2006: Centrelink figures obtained from the Centrelink web site:

www.workplace.gov.au/workplace/Category/ResearchStats/PublicBreachData.htm

Breaching figures shown by the dashed line are estimates because the government has never released them, but welfare organizations believe the rate dropped off sharply from the 2001-2002 year down to 102,000 by 2004 when official figures were first published.

Long term unemployed figures: Australian Bureau of Statistics bulletin 6105.0 *Australian Labour Market Statistics*, Jan 2006.

Compare the two lines. What do you notice?

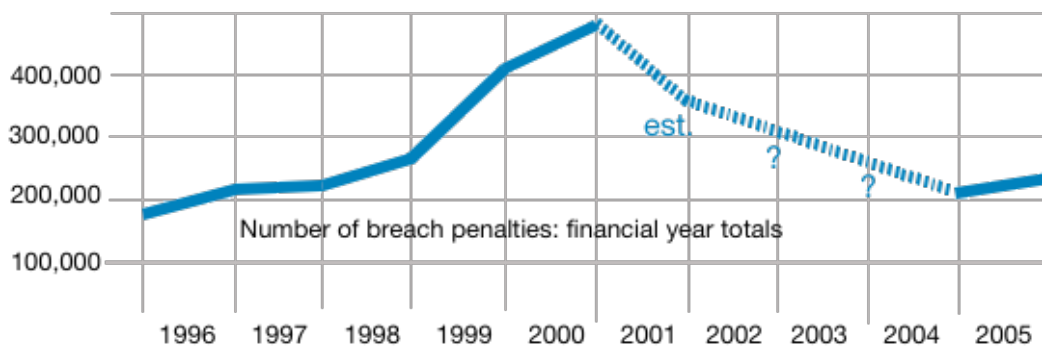
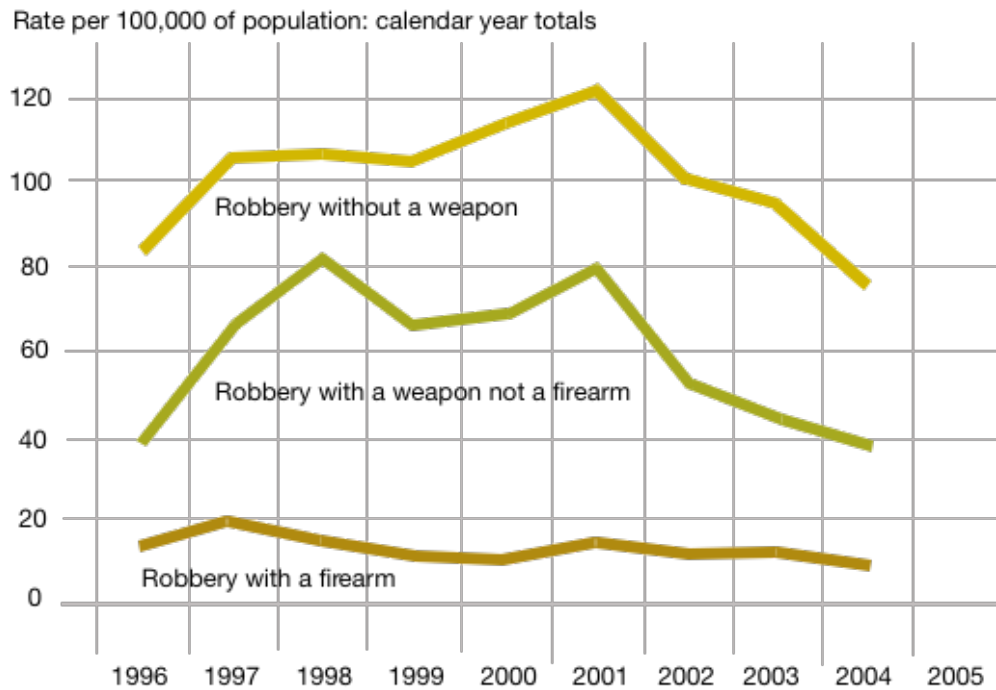
What leaps off the page is that the two lines do not interact. The level of breaching appears to be completely unrelated to the rate at which the long term unemployed were getting into jobs. The strongest indicator of this is what happened in 2000-2001. In that year the rate of breaching dramatically spiked and dropped off again. But this spike had no detectable effect on the rate of long term jobless moving into employment. The jobless rate simply continued drifting down in response to a strongly running economy

that was creating more jobs.

So, what can we conclude? Whatever else was happening here, breaching was not producing the intended behaviours.

But, intriguingly, it may have been producing a different kind of behaviour.

Look at the next two graphs. They shows robberies in New South Wales (which essentially means Sydney, Australia's largest and most difficult city) over the same period, compared with the breaching rate.



Source for robbery statistics: Moffatt S. and Poynton S. (2006) Long-term trends in property and violent crime 1990-2004, *NSW Bureau Crime and Justice Bulletin No 90*, NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research. The data points are slightly out of alignment because the breaching rates are based on financial years and the robbery rates are based on calendar years.

Notice anything? Well I'm no criminologist, but there seems to be a remarkable coincidence here. The rates of robberies without firearms follow eerily similar trajectories to the breaching rates. As breaching increased so did robbery rates. And as soon as the government backed off, so the robbery rate plummeted rapidly back to below its former level.

It's not hard to make a theory about what may have happened here.

Back in 2000 the single adult unemployment benefit was \$163 a week. It wasn't much to live on when rent for a single room in a shared house in an Australian city was typically \$100 to \$160 a week. With this in mind you'll appreciate that the penalties for breaching were severe.

The loss of income for failure to carry out job-seeking activities, for instance, ranged from \$763 (18 percent reduction for twenty-six weeks) for a first breach, to \$1,304 (eight weeks with no payment).⁴⁰

Breaching was therefore a severe financial punishment for people already on the economic margin. It could have severe consequences, including driving people into homelessness. A 2002 survey of fifty-six breached recipients found that 22 percent said they needed to move into less desirable housing because they couldn't afford to pay their rent after even the first breach. Three said they moved "onto the streets" and one to "a men's homeless shelter".⁴¹ Such homelessness is linked with increased prostitution and rates of sexual assault against young people.⁴²

Most people probably copped it sweet, borrowed money, dossed down with friends, went hungry. But some took direct action to maintain their normal lives. They found other, illegal, ways to replace their lost incomes. Yet it seems this tilt into criminality was temporary. Once the rate of breaching returned to below its former level, so did the rates of robbery without firearms. People were not permanently criminalized: it was a reaction to a short-term external pressure, not the result of a permanent internal motivation.

Supernanny shows how humanely administered threats and punishments can work in the controllable world of classrooms and family homes. The Australian embuggerance experiment, however, shows that the free range world presents insuperable obstacles to these approaches. Such high levels of control simply aren't possible. Authorities lack Jo Frost's finely-honed social skills. The respectful one-on-one relationships that make behavioural control possible in the classroom don't exist. The result is perceived as bullying. And bullying causes determined, sustained and often belligerent resistance. Resistance is something that psychologists have been studying for decades.

The psychology of reactance

Psychologists, bless them, have been delivering electric shocks to animals for decades to understand how punishments can modify behaviour. Others have looked at the effect of punishment in classrooms (without electric shocks). Meanwhile researchers in the Exchange Theory tradition have experimented on pairs of people exchanging "monetary units" to see how they respond to the infliction of economic rewards and punishments.

Whatever their differences, social psychologists and exchange theorists agree on one point. Punishment causes anger, hostility, resistance, retaliation, and retreat from the punisher. The punished hit back (resistance) and/or retreat into a protective sub-culture (denial).^{43 44}

As a result of the War on Drugs many convicted drug users responded with anger, aggression and retreat from mainstream American society. It appears that many breached Australian

unemployed responded with anger and retribution by temporarily resorting to criminal behaviour to maintain their living standards.

Resistance is a danger in all kinds of change programs. The reason is that change is always about substitution. Every time we ask people to adopt a new behaviour, we are also asking them to stop an established behaviour. Before people can adopt more healthy, social, eco-friendly behaviours they have to give up established freedoms. Smoking, littering, unprotected sex, driving as often and as fast as they want, using the air conditioner whenever they want, belching or spitting in public, letting their dogs crap on your lawn. Whatever. You may think these freedoms suck. It doesn't matter. They are still freedoms and people hate losing them. They hate losing them so much that, even if the freedoms are merely threatened, people will reassert them by doing with more energy and enjoyment than ever before.

Freedoms can only be surrendered voluntarily and attempts to pressure people into giving them up produces a condition psychologists call "reactance".

Psychologists call resistance by the term "reactance". The original work on this concept was done by husband and wife psychologists, Jack and Sharon Brehm, at the University of Kansas. Their theory is a simple one which goes like this: People are motivated to restore free behaviours which are threatened or eliminated.⁴⁵

In practice it means threatened behaviours automatically become more attractive. People invest more energy in them. They do them more often, with greater determination and higher enjoyment.

The result is a “boomerang effect” or “forbidden fruit” effect where an educational effort produces the opposite behaviour. It’s a common and well documented phenomenon.⁴⁶

As early as 1979 experimenters found that that health warnings produced opposite results. When smokers were given cigarette packets with the statement “Warning by HM Government. Smoking can damage your health” the desire to smoke increased.⁴⁷

Similar effects were found with anti-drug warnings. Repeated exposure to the messages: “Using amphetamines and barbiturates can lead to serious trouble, if you’re using them – stop now – before it’s too late” made people more positive towards drugs.⁴⁸

Psychologists also found that warnings about violent films caused audiences to express a greater desire to watch violent films. When these warnings came from an authoritative source, in that case the US Surgeon General, the desire to watch violent films was even greater.⁴⁹

The same for fatty foods. “Warning people about the harmful effects of fatty products only made them want to eat the fatty product more” the researcher concluded, “Although people don’t mind being informed about the potentially harmful risks associated with products, they don’t like to receive unwanted advice about how they should behave.”⁵⁰

There’s evidence that reactance can be aroused by *any* threat to freedom of choice, however well-meaning or benign.

Even messages as innocuous as:

“Use only what you need”. (Denver Water)

“Don’t play with your health. Check your cholesterol.” (Portuguese Ministry of Health)

could cause resistance because they people see them as directions clearly intended to limit their freedom of choice.

Price increases can also be seen also a kind of pressure.

Tobacco price rises are supposed to induce people to give up smoking but there’s evidence they have little effect.⁵¹ Economists Jerome Adda and Francesca Cornaglia decided to explore this question from an unusual angle. They measured nicotine usage directly by analysing extensive US medical data on saliva tests. They found that, although increases in cigarette taxes did appear to cut the number of cigarettes being sold, it had no effect on the amount of nicotine found in smokers’ saliva. The reason appeared to be that, although smokers were smoking fewer cigarettes, they were smoking each cigarette “more intensely”. As cigarette became more highly taxed through the 1990s, smoking intensity appeared to increase, especially amongst poorer, mainly black Americans.⁵²

FOOTNOTE: recent Australian studies of Alcopops pricie hikes.

Product bans can be a kind pressure too.

In 1972 Miami banned the possession, sale and use of high-phosphate laundry detergents. Interviews with Miami consumers carried out following the ban showed a “forbidden fruit” effect on attitudes and behaviours. Compared to the residents of a control city, Tampa, Miami consumers rated phosphate detergents more

highly [CHECK: meaning of “highly” here]. And here’s the clincher: 12 percent of the Miami sample admitted to smuggling in phosphate detergents from neighbouring counties.⁵³

And, counter-intuitively, the less pressure a person is placed under, the more likely they are to comply!

In an experiment where grocery shoppers were simply presented with cards attached to the shelf informing them, without pressure, of the environmental benefits of low- and medium-phosphate detergents, the result was a significant reduction in high-phosphate sales.⁵⁴

In a study of blood donors half were given high pressure request “our backup supply of your blood type is extremely low”, while the rest were simply asked to donate. Of those given the high pressure request 34 percent agreed to donate. But of those given a simple request 51 percent agreed to give blood.

In a second experiment of those asked to “drop in sometime in the next few days” 50 percent did so, but of those who were to set up a definite appointment only 34 percent did so.⁵⁵

Another study found that polite demands not to litter, such as “Help keep your pool clean” and “Keeping your pool clean depends on you” (or even no message at all) resulted less litter than strong demands like “don’t litter” and “don’t you dare litter”.⁵⁶

In a Halloween night experiment, requests to donate money to UNICEF were more successful when made by children (69 percent) than by adults (42 percent). An explanation was that children were

less powerful agents of influence than adults and therefore put less pressure on householders, resulting in greater compliance.⁵⁷

Other experiments have shown how change agents could, if they were so minded, use resistance to their advantage.

In one experiment an interviewer approached customers in a busy New York shopping centre at a time when the public were facing rapidly rising food prices. The interviewer stopped shoppers and handed them a price control petition. Attached to the petition was a small card with a statement attributed to a public official. In half the interviews the statement described the petition in neutral terms but the other half it included the words "...people absolutely should not be allowed to distribute or sign such petitions." This card produced 20 percent more signatures than the neutral card.⁵⁸

In another study junior high school students were told they would hear from a spokesman for a group advocating a lower driving age. Later they were told that the speech had been cancelled. Half were told the reason was the speaker's health. The other half were told the reason was censorship by a school board official. When later interviewed, the second group were 20 percent more in favour of lowering the driving age than the first group.⁵⁹

Don't muck with comfy zones

"The common people's minds are like clean paper, fit to receive whatsoever by public authorities shall be imprinted in them," wrote that crusty old control freak, Thomas Hobbes, in *Leviathon*, his justification for authoritarian government.

After 350 years, tell and sell continue to be the first ports of call when governments try to deal with tricky behavioural issues: safe sex, nutrition, drugs and alcohol, climate change, saving water, reducing waste, emergency management, road safety, eating one's broccoli and so on.

When tell and sell fail, threat and punishment tend to be the next most favoured options in the behaviour change toolkit.

The problem with these approaches is that they fail to respect people's comfy zones. People are great at resisting changes they don't want. They deny and resist to protect themselves from the consequences of losing control in a dangerous, unpredictable world. As a result it will probably never be worthwhile for change agents to make direct assaults on peoples' comfort zones.

How then do we go about changing the world? Is it a waste of time? In fact there are plenty of examples of successful change programs.

The big challenge for change agents is not really to change people, it's to change their own assumptions about change.

Instead of imposing our motivations on people, for instance, we will always be more effective when we see our job as identifying and enabling the internal motivations that are already inside them.

Instead of imagining that our job is to drag people out of their comfort zones, it's better to think of our work as expanding those comfort zones.

Change need not be seen as some sort of attack on people's badness. It's always better treat people with kindness and respect,

recognising their need to be safe, in control of their lives and feel good about themselves.

I think, from the evidence I can find, that there are five conditions for successful behaviour change projects.

- 1) Buzz – people talk about the issue in their own networks
- 2) Hope – people make the connection between the new behaviour or product and their personal hopes
- 3) Fitness – the change is a good fit for people's wants
- 4) Can do – people feel able to act
- 5) Invitation – people are invited to act by trusted others

These conditions are covered in the next five chapters.

The first of the conditions is that change in populations or groups is a social phenomenon. It needs conversation. The first goal in a change project is therefore not change people, but to get them talking.

¹ Lindner, E. (2000) *The Psychology of Humiliation: Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, and Hitler's Germany*, Doctoral Dissertation submitted to the University of Oslo, p29

² Eisenberger, N.I. and Lieberman, M.D. (2003), Why It Hurts to Be Left Out: The Neurocognitive Overlap Between Physical and Social Pain, *Science* Vol 302, p290

³ Roy F. Baumeister R.F. et al (2002) Effects of Social Exclusion on Cognitive Processes: Anticipated Aloneness Reduces Intelligent Thought, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* Vol 83(4) pp817–827

⁴ Twenge, J.M. et al (2001) If you can't join them, beat them: effects of social exclusion on aggressive behavior, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol 81(6) pp1058-1069

⁵ Baumiester, R.F. et al (2005) Social exclusion impairs self-regulation, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* Vol 88(4) pp589-604

⁶ Sources quoted in Hartling (2005) p4

⁷ Resnick M.D. et al (1997) Protecting adolescents from harm: Findings from a national

longitudinal study on adolescent health, *Journal of the American Medical Association* Vol 278(10) pp823-832

⁸ Quoted in Smith, D. (2004) From the outside, looking in, *Sydney Morning Herald* March 20

⁹ Lindner (2000) p422

¹⁰ Falkin, G.P. et al (2007) Smoking Cessation and Stress Among Teenagers, *Qualitative Health Research*, Vol. 17 (6) pp812-823

¹¹ The studies are summarised in a wonderful review of failed health warnings, campaigns and messages in Ringold, J.R. (2002) Boomerang Effect: In response to public health interventions: Some unintended consequences in the alcoholic beverage market, *Journal of Consumer Policy* 25 p34-35

¹² Engs R.C. and Hanson D.J. (1989) Reactance theory: A test with collegiate drinking, *Psychological Reports* 64, p1085

¹³ Tertoolen, G. et al (1998) Psychological Resistance Against Attempts to Reduce Private Car Use, *Transportation Research-A* vol 32(3), pp171-181

¹⁴ DiCenso, A., Guyatt, G., Willan, W., and Griffith L. (2002) Interventions to reduce unintended pregnancies among adolescents: systematic review of randomised controlled trials, *British Medical Journal* 2002;324:1426

¹⁵ O'Connell K.A. and Cook, M.R. Smoking and Smoking Cessation in Apter, M.J. (ed) *Motivational Styles in Everyday Life, A Guide to Reversal Theory*, American Psychological Association, Washington DC, p139

¹⁶ *Bhash Naidoo, B., Warm, D., Quigley, R., and Taylor, L., (2004)*

Review of reviews of interventions to increase smoking cessation, reduce smoking initiation and prevent further uptake of smoking, Evidence briefing, Health Development Agency (UK)

¹⁷ Foxcroft, D. R., Ireland, D., Lister-Sharp, D. J., Lowe, D. J.

and Breen, R. (2002). Primary prevention for alcohol misuse in young people. *The Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, Issue 3.

¹⁸ Sewel, K. (2002) International Alcohol Policies: A selected literature review, Scottish Executive Central Research Unit p17

An exception, she noted, was when mass media campaigns were combined with rigorous enforcement of drink driving laws.

School-based programs were equally ineffective: "Despite the large number of evaluated primary prevention programmes in educational settings, the available literature does not provide conclusive cause for optimism. Many studies have concluded that educational programmes have largely been ineffective in preventing alcohol misuse and problems, with many programmes increasing knowledge, but very few influencing attitudes, and even less influencing consumption. "Recent attempts to create an effective prevention strategy for young people have recognised the importance of age-specific and participative strategies. These include participation in role-playing, role modeling, peer education, small group work, face-to-face work and community based work." (p15)

¹⁹ *White, D., and Pitts, M., (1998)* Educating young people about drugs: a systematic review, *Addiction* Vol 93, p1475

²⁰ Underhill, K., Montgomery, P. and Operario, D. (2007) Sexual abstinence only programmes to prevent HIV infection in high income countries: systematic review, *British Medical Journal* 335 p248

²¹ *Worsley, A. (2002)* Nutrition knowledge and food consumption: can nutrition knowledge change food behaviour? *Asia Pacific Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, Vol 11 pS579

²² *Mendoza, M. (2007) Review Finds Nutrition Education Failing*, Associated Press 13 August

²³ Kolbe J., Vamos, M., James, F., Elkind, G., and Garrett, J. (1996) Assessment of practical knowledge of self-management of acute asthma, *CHEST: The Cardiopulmonary and Critical Care Journal*

²⁴ Quoted in Z. Kmietowicz (2005) More than half of smokers go on smoking after coronary events, *British Medical Journal* October 15, 2005; 331(7521)

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- ²⁹ Miller, W.R., and Rollnick, S. (2002) *Motivational Interviewing, Preparing People for Change*, The Guilford Press, New York p22
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- ³² Office of National Drug Control Policy, *National Drug Control Strategy FY 2007 Budget Summary*
- ³³ Drug War Facts 2006, Common Sense for Drug Policy: www.drugwarfacts.org/prison.txt
- ³⁴ Gen. Barry R. McCaffrey (ret.), Director, Office of National Drug Control Policy, Keynote Address, Conference on Drug Abuse Prevention Research, National Institute on Drug Abuse, 1996, quoted at www.drugwarfacts.org/prison.txt
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- ³⁸ ACOSS 2001 p6 (CHECK)
- ³⁹ Department of Family and Community Services, Press release, 4 March 2002, Breaching rules change to protect the vulnerable
- ⁴⁰ Australian Council of Social Services (2001) *Doling out punishment, the rise and rise of social security penalties*, joint paper by Welfare Rights Network and Australian Council for Social Services, p5
- ⁴¹ Schooneveldt S. (2002) Do Centrelink Activity Breach penalties coerce outcomes from unemployed welfare recipients in line with Mutual Obligation policy? Paper presented to the Social Change in the 21st Century Conference.
- ⁴² Kerr, L. and Talbot, C. (2005) *Breaching and Homelessness: breaking the cycle*, report for Wesley Uniting Care
- ⁴³ Axelrod (1983) *ibid* p36
- ⁴⁴ Mohr, LD (1997) *Coercive Power in Human Exchange*, Cambridge University Press, p221
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