

# Self-Determination Runs Into a Wall (Actually, a Tree)

## Lessons from Health Coaching

When Curtis told Coach Sarah about the time he purposefully drove himself and a friend into a tree, she did what any good coach would do: she dug into the story behind the story. Many coaching participants forging through behavior change struggle to find the right balance between holding themselves accountable while seeking support from others. Some find that if they rely too much on others, they open themselves to disappointment. The commitment level from friends they've enlisted as supporters is found wanting, or the friend simply didn't have the wherewithal to enforce the expected accountability level. Others find that when they don't actively engage a sponsor, they lapse into quiet self-denial about their tepid progress. No one else is the wiser when yet another well intentioned goal surrenders to a full blown relapse.

Curtis was an altogether different story. He had no such struggles

about what kind of help to seek from others, because he didn't trust anyone. Sarah came to know Curtis as one of her most vociferously independent weight management program clients. If it were self-confidence and a track record of success that explained his sole practitioner approach to tackling his eating problems, perhaps it wouldn't have occupied much of their coaching time. But Sarah learned that Curtis trusted only one other more than himself: God. And the two of them came to agree that his version of the Lone Ranger was leading to maladaptive rather than adaptive behaviors.

The collision with the tree was an alcohol-induced demonstration to his friend that only God could provide support when needed. (Incidentally, Curtis and his friend were okay after the crash, but the friend never drove with Curtis again.) Curtis was evaluated for alcoholism by a qualified



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health professional. During health coaching, Sarah made it clear the health coaching was an education program for weight management, not a treatment program for alcohol.

The following are interactions between Coach Sarah and her faultily self-determined participant, Curtis, as they discuss whether he felt ready to graduate from the coaching program.



**Coach Sarah:** When we've set goals for the weeks ahead, we always return to our discussions about social support. Why has that become our theme?



**Curtis:** I'm on to you, Sarah. You're such a pro at taking me in directions I usually like to avoid. After the various conversations we've had, I do understand how keeping my goals to myself gives me an easy out when I'm slipping up. So, the next time I'm standing at the edge of a cliff, I plan to connect with a friend.



**Coach Sarah:** Well, I wish you weren't so fond of taking crazy risks in the first place. But, assuming I've not convinced you that life doesn't need to be lived on the edge, at least not *all* of the time, what will go through your mind next time you're close to falling?



**Curtis:** One of my big takeaways from our time together, Sarah, is that this is the first time in my life I've thought much about *what* I am thinking.



**Coach Sarah:** That's great! Tell me more about that.



**Curtis:** My initial and automatic thoughts are not good, in the sense that I'm too quick to assume risks are worth taking. And I've also found my thoughts tell me my friends can't be trusted with my survival.



**Coach Sarah:** And why does that matter?



**Curtis:** I find it interesting... this idea that changing my thought habits has a lot to do with whether I'll be successful at changing my eating, drinking, or exercising habits. For example, I get so focused on the excitement of taking risks or so amped about splurging on food that I've never noticed how little thinking I allow before acting; it's just been automatic. It matters to me because you're helping me realize I've been thinking I'm in this alone, that no one can help... that my impulses affect only me. None of this feels true when I take time to think about my thinking.



**Coach Sarah:** And I get amped when I hear how open you are to exploring new thought habits. Thank you for being such a trusting partner in this coaching process.



**Curtis:** I do trust you, Sarah. That's a big, big step for me.

Experienced coaches know that arriving at this conversation certainly didn't happen because Curtis finally had an epiphany one day. With Sarah's guidance, Curtis had been exploring his thought habits for nearly a year. And if Curtis is to be successful, regular practice and reminders about his automatic thinking will be every bit as vital as other new habits, such as establishing triggers for healthy food choices. As they discussed long-term goals, Sarah emphasized the critical role of practice if Curtis was to really re-wire his habitual thoughts about going it alone and taking risks.

Edward Deci and Richard Ryan's work on Self-Determination Theory has enjoyed a resurgence of interest because of the spike in attention concerning the pros and cons of using financial incentives in health promotion. Their studies on how an extrinsic motivator, like cash, can diminish intrinsic motivation provide important context for working with fiercely independent

clients, like Curtis, who chafe at any intrusion into autonomy.

But it's the mini-theories within Self-Determination Theory that also can help assess where Curtis is coming from. Just as Self-Determination Theory connects the need for social support with well-being, Goal Contents Theory examines how "need thwarting" can lead to aggressive actions and ill-being. Curtis hasn't merely discovered self-talk, he's committing to challenge his tendency to think independence and thrill seeking are better than social connections and personal growth.

Sarah feels Curtis's greatest new asset is his mindfulness. Curtis understands that changing his self-talk will require continued hard work and practice, practice, practice.

It's our job to brace participants for the challenges ahead, and it's equally vital that we instill a sense of confidence and wonder that so much

is possible. Consider this: Lighthouse International, an association dedicated to supporting the visually impaired, is making news because they're teaching tennis to the blind. That's right. Even with the adaptations — a foam ball and plastic case holding ball bearings that sound like bells ringing — the very idea of players learning to "see the court in their minds" is as inspirational as it is inconceivable. But here's the simple fact: our brains are extraordinarily adaptable. These pioneering tennis players are showing how the human brain can be repurposed, and that the occipital cortex can learn echolocation. Like any impressive skill, it takes years to become proficient.

What Curtis and the players at Lighthouse have in common is that when they succeed with their audacious undertaking, they will experience a level of autonomy and reward that will get them every bit as amped as a fattening feast. 🍷