

## Editorial

### Commitment to change

One of the large black holes in our knowledge of the processes that lead to behavioural change involves the idea of commitment. What makes an alcoholic finally pledge himself to total abstinence after years of lurching from one binge to the next and one "rock bottom" to another? When he takes the pledge, are his chances immediately improved? What's the relationship between commitment and motivation?

The most common method of analysing a person's motivation to stop smoking or to abstain from alcohol is to draw up a balance sheet of short-term and long-term consequences. In the long-term, the alcoholic's marriage, liver, and job prospects might be expected to improve if abstinence is maintained, but in the short-term, craving and tension have to be faced. What relative values does a particular alcoholic place upon these consequences and what are the subjective expected probabilities that they will occur? The answers to these questions tell us *something* about motivation to change and they also provide some information about the type of help that might be effective. Whether or not to offer family therapy or a job finding club will depend to some extent upon these values and probabilities.

*Commitment* is, of course, influenced by this pay-off matrix, but making a commitment to change also alters the matrix. Pledging oneself to give up smoking, consume 1000 calories a day or stop drinking and climb on the wagon, appears to strengthen resolve. We can put up with more frustration and craving simply because breaking a pledge is unpleasant. Like breaking a gentleman's agreement, we feel that we have failed if we break our agreement with ourselves.

Obtaining a pledge or a commitment is probably one important ingredient of all psychological therapies, but it is usually taken for granted. Should we perhaps make a pledge more explicit? Should we follow the example of Alcoholics Anonymous and make the act of commitment to change a social event? It may be that New Year's Resolutions and other forms of commitment are not as ineffective as they appear to be.

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