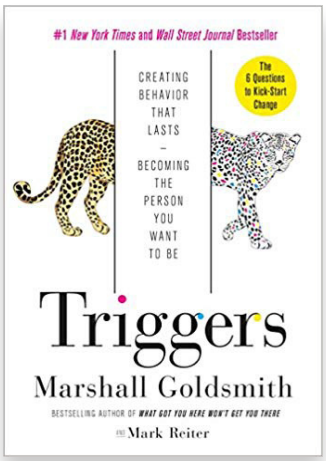

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marshall Goldsmith
Marshall Goldsmith is a world leading executive coach and author. He received his PhD from UCLA Anderson School of Management.

Triggers

THE NUTSHELL

Crown Business 2015

What makes positive, lasting behavioral change so challenging is that we have to do it in our imperfect world, full of triggers that may pull and push us off course. Most of us go through life unaware of how our environment shapes our behavior. When we experience "road rage" on a crowded freeway, it's not because we're sociopathic monsters. It's because the temporary condition of being behind the wheel in a car, surrounded by rude, impatient drivers, triggers a change in our otherwise placid demeanor. We've unwittingly placed ourselves in an environment of impatience, competitiveness, and hostility—and it alters us. If we do not create and control our environment, our environment creates and controls us. The result turns us into someone we do not recognize.

It's not just environmental intrusions and unpredicted events that upset our plans. It's also our willful discounting of past experience. We make plans that are wholly contradicted by our previous actions. The planner who intends to make a deadline is also the myopic doer who forgets that he has never made a deadline in his life. The planner believes this time will be different. The doer extends the streak of missed deadlines. The yawning gap between planner and doer persists even when conditions for success are practically ideal.

It's a simple equation: to avoid undesirable behavior, avoid the environment where it is most likely to occur. If you don't want to be lured into a tantrum by a colleague who gets on your nerves, avoid him. If you don't want to indulge in late-night snacking,

Published by Study Leadership, Inc. 872 New Britton Rd, Carol Stream, IL 60188

don't wander into the kitchen looking for leftovers in the fridge. Of course, there are many moments in life when avoidance is impossible. We have to engage, even if doing so terrifies us (public speaking), or enrages us (visiting our in-laws), or turns us into jerks (conducting business with people we don't respect).

For years I've followed a nightly follow-up routine that I call Daily Questions. I have someone call me wherever I am in the world and listen while I answer a specific set of questions that I have written for myself. As an experiment, I tweaked the questions using the "Did I do my best to" formulation. Did I do my best to be happy? Did I do my best to find meaning? Did I do my best to have a healthy diet? Did I do my best to be a good husband?

Using the words "did I do my best" added the element of trying into the equation. It injected personal ownership and responsibility into my question-and-answer process. After a few weeks using this checklist, I noticed an unintended consequence. Active questions themselves didn't merely elicit an answer; they created a different level of engagement with my goals. To give an accurate accounting of my effort, I couldn't simply answer yes or no or "30 minutes." I had to rethink how I phrased my answers. Then, I had to measure my effort and, to see if I was actually making progress, I had to measure on a relative scale, comparing the most recent day's effort with previous days. I chose to grade myself on a 1-to-10 scale, with 10 being the best score. If I scored low on trying to be happy, I had only myself to blame. We may not hit our goals every time, but there's no excuse for not trying.

This "active" process will help anyone get better at almost anything. It only takes a couple of minutes a day. But be warned: it is tough to face the reality of our own behavior—and our own level of effort—every day.

My first six questions are the Engaging Questions that I suggest for everyone:

• Did I do my best to set clear goals today?

• Did I do my best to make progress toward my goals today?

• Did I do my best to find meaning today?

• Did I do my best to be happy today?

• Did I do my best to build positive relationships today?

• Did I do my best to be fully engaged today?

There's no correct number of questions. The number is a personal choice, a function of how many issues you want to work on, but your Daily Questions should reflect your objectives. They're not meant to be shared in public, meaning they're not designed to be judged. You're not constructing your list to impress anyone. It's your list, your life. I score my "Did I do my best" questions on a simple I to 10 scale. You can use whatever works for you. Your only considerations should be first, are these important in my life? Second, will success on these items help me become the person I want to be?

Convene

Triggers

Daily Questions, by definition, compel us to take things one day at a time. In doing so they shrink our objectives into manageable twenty-four-hour increments. By focusing on effort, they distract us from our obsession with results (because that's not what we're measuring). In turn, we are free to appreciate the process of change and our role in making it happen. We're no longer frustrated by the languid pace of visible progress because we're looking in another direction.

There are no absolutes in behavioral change. We never achieve perfect patience or generosity or empathy or humility. The best we can hope for is a consistency in our effort—a persistence of striving—that makes other people more charitable about our shortcomings. What's worrisome is when the striving stops, our lapses become more frequent, and we begin to coast on our reputation. That's the perilous moment when we start to settle for "good enough."

The problem begins when this good enough attitude spills beyond our marketplace choices and into the things we say and do. The mustard on a sandwich can be good enough. But in the interpersonal realm—we're talking about how a husband treats his wife, or a son deals with an aging parent or a trusted friend responds when people are counting on him—good enough is setting the bar too low.

There is an ultimate blessing of not settling for good enough. When we dive all the way into adult behavioral change with 100 percent focus and energy, we become an irresistible force rather than the proverbial immovable object. We begin to change our environment rather than be changed by it. The people around us sense this. We have become the trigger.