

# Act Yourself Into A New Way of Feeling

The American psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan (1892-1949) did groundbreaking work analyzing the connection between anxiety and one's interpersonal relationships. He is quoted as telling his patients, "It's often easier to act yourself into a new way of feeling, than to feel yourself into a new way of acting."

I know a lot more about the Bible than psychiatry, but I sure do love that quotation. Sullivan based it on his experiences dealing with people who were very reluctant to change their behavior. He began counseling people to make changes based on what they ought to do, rather than waiting to feel like it was what they wanted to do.

Spiritually, we all find ourselves in situations where we don't want to do something we ought to do. Sullivan's prescription would be to force ourselves do it, and fully expect that the feelings will follow after eventually.

I have certainly found that to be true. For example, it would be nice if, every time Sunday morning rolled around, I woke exuberantly singing the words of Psalm 122, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!' " Some mornings I do. Some mornings I'm just not feeling it. But if I make myself go anyway, 99% of the time I depart the worship assembly feeling like I made the right decision, and feeling like I gained a great blessing from being there. I suddenly discover that I have become filled with the very feeling I was searching for as a motivation for getting dressed and combing my hair and going to worship!

There are those days that the words of Jesus in Matthew 25:36 are glowing in my mind, "I was naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited Me." I can't wait to fill my hours with visiting people and praying with people. And then there are those days when I would rather pretend I can't hear the phone. There's no lack of handy excuses to use to avoid that type of messy human contact. In fact, some of those excuses are extremely valid—I have too much study prep that I am neglecting, or others can do it. Some aren't so valid—maybe I'm just not in the mood. But when I make myself go, 99% of the time I come away with a deep sense of satisfaction, a feeling of having been used by God to bring a blessing to others. I suddenly discover that I have become filled with the very feeling I was searching for as a motivation to push away from the books and computer screen and drive to the hospital.

When there is plenty of the green stuff in my wallet, I have no hesitation to "Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you" (Matt. 5:42). When there is a decent dollar figure in my checking account on the first day of the week, I have no problem keeping the command "let each one of you put aside and save as he may prosper" (1 Cor. 16:1-2). Other times, the impulse is not quite so forthcoming. In my mind's eye, I can see

my desires more tangibly than the needs of other families. But when I make myself give as planned, 99% of the time I see how those dollars are being put to very good use in the kingdom. I suddenly discover that I have become filled with the very feeling I was searching for to stop thinking selfishly and opening my heart to the needs of other people.

Shall I speak of repentance? Perhaps there's no other area of my life I am so resistant to change than when it comes to my own treasured sins. Here, I am especially skillful at using a lack of desire as an excuse to stay involved in sin. Of course it's that way—because sin feels good (Heb. 11:25)! As Paul says in Galatians 5:16-17, Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. When it comes to temptation, sin is the thing that I desire. If I wait to feel like repenting, I never will! Each Christian must commit to following God's word, because if he doesn't, Satan will use the weakness of the flesh to make sin feel like an essential part of a happy life. But when I make myself abandon some sinful object, activity, or relationship, within just a few days a clean feeling washes over me that reassures me that I have chosen correctly, that convinces me that my connection to God has been restored. I discover that I now possess the feeling I was searching for as a motivation for abandoning the sin.

In all areas of our spiritual life, duty must never accept lack of desire as a valid excuse. To put it another way, don't wait for the "want to do it" when you "have to do it"; just do it, and the "want to" will show up later as a sense of satisfaction. And moreover, it will be easier to feel motivated the next time!

Let us all strive to have the attitude found in Deut. 10:12, to "serve the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul." But if you aren't filled with such excitement every moment of the day, settle for the first part of the passage, "fear the Lord your God!" and obey Him anyway. Soon, you will see the value of obedience, and the blessings of good works. The line between duty and delight will become so blurred as to practically disappear. "Doing the will of God from the heart" (Eph. 6:6) becomes natural the more you do it. Of course it is best to "serve the Lord your God with joy and a glad heart" (Deut. 28:47), but temporarily lacking that joy, go ahead and serve, and the joy will come along presently. If today it is difficult to "do your work heartily, as for the Lord" (Col. 3:23), do it anyway, and the heart-felt feelings will show up sooner than later. If today you do not "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matt. 5:6), make a commitment to righteousness anyway, and the fruits of such godly behavior will produce a sense of appreciation and delight.

Do not forget that desire is never a prerequisite for obedience. Consider this parable from Luke 17:7-10, Which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, "Come immediately and sit down to eat"? But will he not say to him, "Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me while I eat and

drink; and afterward you may eat and drink”? He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he? When you do all the things which are commanded you, say, “We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.” When we stand before God, He will not accept the excuse, “Well, I just didn’t feel like obeying You today! I was waiting for You to make me feel like obeying You! I was waiting for You to put it into my heart to obey.” No, He will ask why we allowed the ups and downs of emotion to get in the way of our God-given task. —John Guzzetta