



Clear Thinking Issue 148

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3 easy ways to help your clients avoid the elastic band effect

By **Mark Tyrrell**

Stretch an elastic band too far in one direction, and so much tension will build in the rubber that eventually it will ping back *further the other way* than it was before you started pulling it (as long as you haven't gone so far that it actually breaks).

It's the same with people. Tell a teenage girl *not* to see her edgy but compelling boyfriend and she'll want him even more. *Deny* yourself the 'treat' of a cigarette then watch yourself snap back into the habit when the denial gets too much.

Trying not to smoke, not to call your toxic ex, not hurl those refined carbs down your throat is very commendable, of course. But the problem with will power is that it tends to be rather finite. It's a strain and a stretch. Researchers (1) have even found that using it up in one place – biting your tongue with that impossibly irritating co-worker perhaps – can weaken it in another – say with that exquisitely inviting bag of chocolate chip cookies winking at you after a shift with said co-worker.

This is not to say that will power can't be strengthened with practice, because all the evidence tells us it can. However, relying *exclusively* on will power may not always be the way to go. It can be great for kick starting things, for getting going. We can will power ourselves to take those first steps out of smoking. But at some stage it needs to feel *natural* not to smoke, rather than a constant effort.

As therapists we can help our clients get to the *natural* bit straight away (at least some of the time) and we can do this by avoiding the elastic band effect as much as possible.

Here's three tips for how you might do that:

(1) Separate the 'behaviour' from their 'core identity'

Make it plain that who they are (identity) is quite distinct from what they do (the behaviour) but they are nonetheless fully *responsible* for the behaviour.

So rather than talking about *your addiction*, which implies that it is a central immutable part of them, talk in terms of *that behaviour*. The word 'that' indicates that it is separate from them, while the word 'behaviour' still implies responsibility.

It also helps to use terms that treat the problem as outside of them. Something which is 'outside', and therefore separate, is more easily seen as less relevant, and so easier to leave behind. You don't have to battle with yourself quite so hard if what you are fighting is not seen as something inside yourself.

So we might describe smoking as a 'parasite', something that tries to 'con' them into poisoning themselves. Get them to see the smoking, or the drinking, or the toxic relationship, as separate from who they fundamentally are (2).

Describing the compulsion with unfamiliar analogies and metaphors helps to jolt people out of their habitual victim view of what's going on ("I just can't help it"). It makes the issue start to feel separate from them and therefore something that is easier to detach from – or that may have even *already* detached from them.

If someone is trying to force you to do something you don't want to do, it feels much less *internally* compelling and may even really put you off doing it. By describing the behaviour as external to them, something that is 'bullying' them, that they can 'stand up to', we are seeking to bypass the elastic band effect all together.

(2) Prepare them for the elastic band effect

We therapists don't particularly like to appear negative (unless we are cunningly trying to help our contrary clients exercise *their* positivity) but sometimes forewarned really is for forearmed.

So I might start telling a woman how, even though she feels strong and determined right now, there *might* come a time when the old pull to get back with her abusive ex starts to feel strong:

It might be a time when you feel a bit tired... or bored... or lonely... when suddenly your head is full of biased memories of good times... blanking out the bad... and that urge to get in touch gets stronger... and then how are you going to let those promptings to contact him again know who's boss?

In this way we are preparing for the elastic band effect by acknowledging that it exists and can affect us. I will often hypnotically prepare a client by getting them to rehearse feeling pulled back towards a destructive behaviour, only to find the pull slackens again and gets less and less 'taut' over time.

(3) Never say never!

'Never' can be a pretty scary word. Sometimes the thought: "I can *never* have a cigarette" or "I can *never* have another cream cake" can actually increase the pull back into the behaviour. So we can reassure our clients they never have to think in terms of 'never'.

I might say:

You know... a non smoker can have a cigarette and still not be a smoker – they are just a non-smoker who just had a cigarette...

I might describe how we can be on a ten mile walk and now and then retrace our steps a bit, but it doesn't matter because *generally* we are moving forward. To take pressure off, I might suggest to a smoker wanting to quit that they *might* have one or two more cigarettes here and there as the behaviour 'peters out' – or they might not, of course.

In this way we make the elastic band less taut and less likely to ping back uncontrollably.

I'll also talk in terms of not having to go around thinking "I'll never do this" or "I'll never do that!" It's just unnecessary. I doubt I'll ever start wearing women's clothes or self harming or injecting heroin, but I don't go around thinking to myself "I'll never do this!" Of course, I don't know for sure that I won't be doing these things in ten years' time, but the point is I don't *need* to know, because it's not what I do right now, and that's all that matters!

Believe it or not, talking like this to someone who is overcoming a compulsion can be wonderfully reassuring.

A destructive compulsion disappears not when we spend all our time pulling away from it but when we put the 'elastic band' aside entirely and focus elsewhere.

We can help our clients do this.

Notes

(1) One study has found that exercising self-control is such hard work, it measurably depletes our glucose levels. See: [Self control relies on glucose as an energy source](#). Gailliot et al., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 2007 Feb; 92(2):325-36.

(2) See: [Are you in the smoking cult?](#)

Find out why Kiwis love our 'Smoking Cessation Training Course'

We converted our 'Smoking Cessation Training Course' into a self-service format last year, and we could wax lyrical about how good the course is, but we would say that! Instead, you can find out what [Melody and Rose have to say about the course](#), both from the beautiful Aotearoa.

To save 10% from the Smoking Cessation Training Course, and all our other training products, consider [joining the Growth Zone](#) on Hypnosis Downloads. If you're already a member, the course is 32.5 credits, and includes the popular '10 Steps to Become a Non-Smoker'. [Read more about the Smoking Cessation Training Course](#).

See you in a fortnight.

Mark Tyrrell

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