

# HEARTWARE CHANGE YOUR ENVIRONMENT

by Henry Lew, psychologist



**H**ave you ever wondered why it is so hard to change and maintain your diet? Why you just cannot bring yourself to exercise regularly even though you know that it is good for you? Well, perhaps because even though you “know what to do”, something else could be getting in the way. It is called environmental influences.

**Consider the following three statements. Are they myth or fact?**

- 1. I know how much I eat.
- 2. I control how much I eat
- 3. I just need discipline to exercise.

As much as the statements appear to be facts, they are actually myths. These myths minimise, discount and disregard environmental influences on our behaviours pertaining to exercise and diet.

## Myth #1

### I KNOW HOW MUCH I EAT.

Our environment may actually determine how much we eat instead!

In a landmark study by Dr Brian Wansink, individuals were given either medium or large size popcorn. Those with the large size portion ate 50% more than those who ate from the medium portion. In another instance, individuals drank soup from a bowl that was either bottomless (i.e. it kept replenishing itself) or a normal bowl (soup supply was limited). Those who drank from the ‘bottomless’ bowl drank more! In both studies, all were unaware of the portion size and simply ate what was given.

The arrangement of food seems to influence our eating habits as well. Individuals tend to eat more when food is arranged neatly, and also when the dish looks like it has some variety of ingredients, compared to the same dish that is all mixed up!

### What you can do:

- Limit your patronage of ‘high-risk’ places that offer bigger or upsized portions, top-ups, free flow of soft drinks, etc.
- When preparing healthy meals, arrange the dishes/ingredients neatly so that the food appears more appetising.

## Myth #2

### I CONTROL HOW MUCH I EAT.

Environmental cues that suggest what kind of meal we are having may instead determine how much we eat!

Two groups of people were provided with the same food but different environmental cues. One group had disposable utensils (paper/plastic) normally associated with snack time or tea, etc. Another group was given ceramic utensils normally associated with a proper meal. These individuals actually ate more than those using disposable utensils, highlighting how subtle environmental cues can prompt us to eat more and circumvent our best efforts to eat less.

### What you can do:

- Plan and decide what you want to eat before you go out to eat or prepare your own meals to avoid temptation.
- The size of your plate or bowl should be based on the amount of food you want to eat till you are comfortably full, and not beyond the point of fullness.
- If you need to have a snack, limit the size to a snack’s portion and keep the rest away. Out of sight, out of mind and out of your autopilot hands that feed your mouth when you are multi-tasking.

## Myth #3

### I JUST NEED THE DISCIPLINE TO EXERCISE.

You may think that exercise is just about getting down to it. It appears that reminders make quite a difference. Individuals who saw cues about exercise along their way home from work were more likely to hit the gym compared to those who did not encounter such cues. Individuals who received SMS reminders to exercise were also more likely to initiate regular exercise.

Habits could well be a result of “automacity” rather than “frequency”. In other words, habits like regular exercise are usually formed because there are cues in the environment that regularly prompt and support one to exercise, e.g. Mdm Sulaiman walks regularly after dinner, mainly because her grandchildren will remind and encourage her to join them for walks.

## What you can do:

Build cues into your physical or social environment to help you to exercise regularly since good habits are better formed if we engineer our environment. This may include:

- Physical reminders to exercise, e.g. timetable to exercise, mobile alerts that are programmed into your phone to go to the gym or take a brisk walk, etc.
- Social reminders, e.g. a workout buddy, exercising with your family and friends, etc.

In our journey to achieve a healthier lifestyle, we may meet with obstacles and difficulties. In some situations we cannot change much, but there are bound to be areas in our environment we can modify, even if it is the tiniest thing. Remember small drops of water make up an ocean.

## SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTAL PRESSURE TO EAT

Here is a quiz to help you determine how well you cope with social influences on your eating habits. Rate yourself on each of the statements then refer to the scoring for some guidelines on how to manage these environmental social cues.

1= Never 2 = Sometimes 3 = Usually 4 = Almost Always 5= Always

**My Score**

01	It's not right to say "no" when someone is just trying to be nice to me.	
02	It's often hard for me to speak up for what I need or want.	
03	I'd rather put my own needs second than hurt someone else's feelings.	
04	It isn't fair to want others to help me in my weight-management efforts.	
05	I shouldn't not involve others in my problems.	
06	I need to drink or eat a lot at a restaurant in order to make others feel comfortable.	
07	When someone else is paying for it, I feel I may as well take advantage of it.	
08	Guests who are invited to dinner expect to be treated to fancy (i.e., high calorie) meals.	
09	A good host prepares special meals for invited guests, and this involves a heavy meal and a sweet dessert.	
10	When invited to dinner, I should show my appreciation by eating well.	
11	Calling ahead to inquire about the menu or making special requests of a host is making a nuisance of myself.	
12	Other people depend on me, and their needs must come first.	
13	When someone tries to pressure me, I resist, even if what they want me to do is a good idea.	
14	When someone I care about does not want me to change, I feel I should do as they ask.	
15	I like the attention and sympathy I get from having a weight problem.	
16	I can't resist food at parties or celebrations.	
17	When I see others eating, I just cannot resist getting something to eat too.	
18	It isn't polite to refuse food when someone has prepared it especially for me.	
	<b>TOTAL</b>	

## HOW DID YOU FARE?

**18-36: Low Pressure Quotient**  
Your beliefs are strong enough to help you resist social influences.

**37-53: Moderate Pressure Quotient**  
Some of your beliefs make it difficult for you to cope with social pressures. Identify which beliefs are a hindrance and try to change them.

**54-90: High Pressure Quotient**  
Much of your belief system makes it harder for you to cope with social influences. You need to challenge your beliefs and change the way you think about them.