

## Micro-Decision Making Below the Conscious Horizon Negatively Impacts Health

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### ABSTRACT

*Anyone who has ever been the parent of a teenager, knows that their teenagers can be short-sighted in their thinking and in their subsequent actions. Parents worry that their teenager will make poor decisions that will have lasting repercussions; however, adults make short-sighted, myopic decisions every single day that can have a lifelong negative impact on their health. In essence, adults have a “teenage” brain when it comes to the multitude of seemingly insignificant decisions that they make every single day. Living above the conscious horizon is a lifelong strategy to position decision making into the forefront and quantifiable objective reality. Lifestyle choices are a major contributing factor in the development of chronic disease. We also know that chronic disease can take months, if not years, to fully develop or to have noticeable symptoms. Living above the conscious horizon is a strategy about mitigating risk, not about placing blame. Wearing a seatbelt will mitigate the risk of injury from a car accident; however, wearing a seatbelt doesn't completely eliminate the risk altogether. Conscious decision making mitigates against the risk of poor health; however, it is not a guarantee of good health. Waking up and paying more attention to the multitude of our daily decisions, brings into the light that which is hidden and is the result of living above the conscious horizon.*

### Keywords

Conscious, Decisions, Health, Mitigating risk, Teenager.

### When was the last time that you rented a car, and before you returned it, you washed it?

This same question was posed by my college economics professor back when I was an undergraduate student many years ago. After the laughter had died down in the lecture hall, it was clear my professor had made his point. There is an inherent difference in how we treat something we own, versus something we rent. Speaking of cars, what would happen if we had one car, and one car only, for our entire lives? Can you imagine how hypervigilant you would be about taking care of your one and only car? I am certain you would take it in for regular oil changes, you would ensure there is always ample tread on the tires, and you would most likely have your auto mechanic on speed dial. Why is it then that we are born with one body, and only one body to last our entire lives, and yet, we are not hypervigilant about taking care of it?

Perhaps we don't value health? I conducted a survey to find out

if we do indeed value our health. I asked 100 people if they could have health but not wealth OR wealth but not health, which would they choose and why? My survey results indicated that yes, we do value health because 97% of the respondents chose health over wealth. In fact, they indicated that without health, wealth would be meaningless. The remaining 3% that chose wealth stated that “if you have enough wealth, you can purchase good health.” They obviously viewed health as a commodity that can simply be bought and sold. You don't have to look too far to see examples of extremely wealthy people, who succumbed to an illness. A perfect example is Apple executive, Steve Jobs. His enormous financial resources could not fix his ailing health and unfortunately, he died at a relatively young age.

### How does knowledge factor into our state of health?

With the advent and proliferation of the internet, one could draw the conclusion that there is plenty of information available to discover and learn about healthy living habits. True, there can be some conflicting reports, but the overall concept of eating right, exercising, and taking care of our mental well being is a common

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theme to stay on the path of good health. The aforementioned points to the idea that “knowledge does NOT equate to change in behavior.” We can know something yet not implement or act upon that knowledge.

### **How does intention factor into the equation of health?**

I read an article awhile ago where they asked participants to pick a snack for an upcoming meeting that was being held within a few weeks. The meeting participants were to choose either a banana or chocolate for the upcoming meeting. What was interesting is that most of the participants chose the banana, the healthier option, when responding to the request. However, on the actual day of the meeting, people were told they could choose either snack, regardless of what they originally picked. Interestingly enough more people chose the chocolate over the banana when the day of the meeting took place. The importance of the banana/chocolate example, is that people intended to be healthy but their actual actions did not align with their intentions. Don't many of us intend to stop smoking, intend to eat healthy, intend to start exercising, and yet never align our actions with our intentions?

### **Where is the breakdown in acting and behaving in a manner that supports good health?**

I believe it has everything to do with the way we make the multitude of seemingly insignificant decisions every day, week, month and years of our life. But first, I want us to think about teenagers. Teenagers are very focused on what feels good, seems good, and appears good in the moment without thinking about the long-term repercussions of their decisions. And when asked about their less than desirable decisions after the fact, we hear things from our teenagers such as: “it sure seemed like something fun to do in the moment” and “I didn't think anything bad would come of it.” I suggest that we have the “teenage brain” when it comes to making decisions that negatively impact our health.

Many of us have a daily ritual of going to get our morning coffee at our favorite little corner shop. This ritual is something that many of us would quantify as such a small dollar amount that we don't register in our conscious minds the \$5 that we spend to satisfy our morning coffee fix. In fact, we don't take pause when parting with \$5; in return our taste buds are satisfied and we get a quick injection of caffeine to start our day. Now, if you were going to spend \$1,300 on an item or experience, we would most likely pause at such an expenditure. The amount seems material enough or significant enough to register in our consciousness. The interesting fact is that over a year's time of our morning coffee ritual, we spend approximately \$1,300 of our financial resources. The \$1,300 spent in one transaction was enough to make us take pause and think about it; yet we spend that same \$1,300 in such small daily increments of \$5 at a time that we don't register it with our conscious thoughts. This is exactly what happens with our health. We partake in daily routines or decisions that are so small in material significance, that we don't register their possible long-term impact on our lives. And let's not kid ourselves, these decisions can be fun to make. Do you want to eat a cookie, some potato chips, or greasy, fatty, salty foods? The answer is most

certainly YES! These small, seemingly insignificant decisions we make are fun and enjoyable in the moment. Who does that sound like? It sounds like the “teenage brain” making decisions. The brain that only cares about the immediate satisfaction, immediate payoff or immediate gain and not the brain that registers the long-term impact or consequences of a decision.

### **How do we get out of the “teenage brain” and start managing our lives?**

We can bring into the conscious mind that which has long been unregistered and unnoticed by falling below the conscious horizon. We can start to pay attention to our actions in an aggregate manner. Did you know that an airplane is off course 99% of the time yet, you always seem to get to your destination? How does getting from New York City to Rome manage to happen when you are off course most of the time? It happens because the plane has a constant feedback loop that notices when the plane is off course and realigns the plane with the proper destination, in this case Rome, Italy. It is the same with our lives. If we have a constant feedback loop that measures what we do, we can realign and readjust to get back on course.

Living above the conscious horizon requires a proactive mindset. When we think of our one and only car example, we can imagine being incredibly proactive about ensuring that our car gets in for regular maintenance. The stakes are too high to simply wait around while hoping and praying that our car mechanic remembers to get us in for our annual checkup. Why wouldn't we then be proactive with our health? Why wouldn't we ensure that we do not miss any annual screening tests that are appropriate for our age and gender by calling our doctor to make sure we get in? Why do we abdicate this responsibility to a healthcare system versus owning it ourselves?

When we think about living above the conscious horizon, we are talking about a strategy for mitigating risk. We are not talking about placing blame on patients for their condition. Lifestyle choices are a major contributing factor in the development of chronic disease. We also know that chronic disease can take months, if not years, to fully develop or to have noticeable symptoms. Wearing a seatbelt will mitigate the risk of injury from a car accident; however, wearing a seatbelt doesn't completely eliminate the risk altogether. Conscious decision making mitigates against the risk of poor health; however, it is not a guarantee of good health. Waking up and paying more attention to the multitude of our daily decisions, brings into the light that which is hidden and is the result of living above the conscious horizon.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we can think of the fable of the frog and the boiling water. We know that the frog that is put into boiling water, will immediately jump out realizing that if he stays, he will face certain death. Boiling water is significant enough to register in the frog's immediate consciousness and he takes immediate lifesaving measures. However, that same frog put into lukewarm or tepid water will be oblivious to his surroundings because lukewarm or tepid

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water falls below the conscious horizon. As the water temperature changes ever so slightly over time, the frog unfortunately suffers an early demise. We too are like the frog in tepid water; whereby, we don't pay attention to the multitude of decisions that we make

every single day that negatively impacts our health. We too are possibly headed for chronic disease, for debilitating disease, or we could unfortunately croak early like the frog.