**Understanding What Drives Healthy Behavior**

**NEW YORK, November 2017** - Have you ever wondered why it's so hard to stick to that diet or exercise routine? You’re not alone. Researchers funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Common Fund are wondering that, too. The NIH Science Of Behavior Change (SOBC) program has tasked SOBC researchers with developing scientific methods that will reveal how and why people make and maintain healthy behavior change. SOBC is looking to develop blueprints for effective behavioral interventions that will reliably improve health outcomes.

Human behavior accounts for almost 40% of the risk associated with preventable premature deaths in the United States. Smoking, drinking, and drug abuse, as well as physical inactivity and poor diet, contribute to many common diseases and adverse health conditions. Unfortunately, there are few tried and true approaches to motivate people to adopt healthy behaviors. It’s difficult for people to change unhealthy behavior and even more difficult for them to maintain positive behavior changes over time. A lot of work has been done in the field of behavioral medicine to help people make healthy choices, and some of that work has been successful.

“The problem is that even when efforts are successful, we don’t know *why* or *how* they worked.” explains Dr. Donald Edmondson, an Associate Professor and one of the leaders of the SOBC program hub located at Columbia University Medical Center, “We use terms like ‘willpower’ and ‘self-control’ when we talk about behavior change without really understanding what those things mean. Understanding what underlies successful behavior change is the key to getting it to happen again.”

SOBC is applying a rigorous experimental medicine approach to identify the mechanisms that drive behavior change, at the same time, setting the standard for how behavioral research is done.

“Knowing why a behavior change intervention didn't work is actually just as important as knowing why it did,” said Dr. Edmondson. “What we are interested in is uncovering the underlying mechanism for change. If we can do that, then we can begin to reliably affect changes across different behaviors because we'll know which mechanisms we need to influence.”

Supported by the NIH Common Fund, Dr. Edmondson, Dr. Karina Davidson, and their team at Columbia University Medical Center are building a network of like-minded scientists that are not only conducting research using this new approach, but also sharing it openly, so they can see where their work might overlap, uncovering new insights that were not possible before.

This work is being used to develop a Measures Repository available on the SOBC website ([www.scienceofbehaviorchange.org/measures](http://www.scienceofbehaviorchange.org/measures)). Scientists from around the world will be able to use this repository as their go-to resource for validated behavioral science measures. SOBC is embracing open science and placing rigor, reproducibility, and transparency at the forefront of all these efforts. Details of all the SOBC projects are available on the Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/zp7b4/>).

The United States spends more on health care than any other country in the world, and yet it has the poorest health among high-income nations. Chronic diseases contribute to 7 out of 10 deaths in the United States, and many of these chronic diseases are preventable. Treatment of these diseases accounts for over 85% of U.S. health costs.

“Every day, millions of people make resolutions to start diets and exercise routines or they work hard to manage chronic illness and stress, but too often these efforts are a dead end. That’s because behavior change is nearly impossible if you don’t know the underlying processes that determine success. It’s about understanding those underlying drivers of behavior change, tweaking them to fit your goals, and making them work for you,” said Edmondson.

Research is currently being conducted at eight academic institutions, including Brown University, Dartmouth College, New York University, University of Illinois at Chicago, University of Michigan, Pennsylvania State University, Princeton University, and State University of New York at Buffalo. Initial results will be available in 2018. Researchers and the public can learn more about SOBC, its method, and the projects at [www.scienceofbehaviorchange.org](http://www.scienceofbehaviorchange.org). SOBC will also be profiled in a special issue of *Behaviour Research and Therapy* (“An Experimental Medicine Approach to Behavior Change: The NIH Science of Behavior Change”) in February 2018.

SOBC is funded by the Common Fund Program in the Office of Strategic Coordination and the Office of the Director of the NIH. Common Fund programs have goals that resonate with the missions of multiple Institutes, Centers, and Offices at the NIH and its programs are intended to be transformative, catalytic, synergistic, cross cutting, and unique. The SOBC Common Fund Program began in 2009 and is currently in its second phase. NIH staffs from more than 15 Institutes, Centers, and Offices are involved in the SOBC Common Fund Program, and several of them are active members of SOBC as Program Officials and Project Scientists associated with Network projects.

**About the CBCH at Columbia University Medical Center**

The Center for Behavioral Cardiovascular Health (CBCH) at Columbia University Medical Center is an interdisciplinary team of scientists dedicated to understanding how and why behaviors, psychological factors and societal forces influence hypertension and cardiovascular disease. The CBCH staff conducts basic, translational and clinical research, and train the next set of professionals to carry on their research mission. For more, visit [www.cumc.columbia.edu/cbch/](http://www.cumc.columbia.edu/cbch/).

**About the NIH**

The NIH, a part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is the nation’s medical research agency — making important discoveries that improve health and save lives. NIH’s mission is to seek fundamental knowledge about the nature and behavior of living systems and the application of that knowledge to enhance health, lengthen life, and reduce illness and disability. For more, visit [www.nih.gov](http://www.nih.gov).