Episode Book

EPISODE #5879

Why Experts Don't Follow Their Own Advice

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SYNOPSIS

We've all met the doctor who skips the gym, the dentist who drinks soda, the tech worker who thinks his own product is garbage. The lazy answer is "people are hypocrites." The data says something far stranger: the people who know the most are sometimes the worst at following their own advice. Drawing on a University of Alberta physician survey, a 2024 Israeli study of healthcare workers, a Thai study of 842 dental professionals, and an MIT-Stanford-Harvard analysis of 5.8 million Swedes across 63 drug guidelines, we dig into why expertise can actually predict worse adherence — and why the word "hypocrite" may be the wrong tool entirely.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Here's a question that anyone who's spent enough time around professionals eventually runs into. Daniel puts it this way. We've all heard "do as I say, not as I do." How many of us have known doctors who do the exact opposite of every health recommendation they talk about? People working in technology who think the whole thing is a bunch of crap. Dentists who chug soda like it's going out of style. He says the reflexive take is that humans are just a hypocritical bunch, and then he wonders whether that's actually a cheap shot. A superficial read. He numbers himself among the tribe, which is honest of him. And the question underneath it all is this. Why can we connect with an idea deeply enough to teach it to someone else, and still not live it ourselves?



Herman

That's all of it, isn't it. Because the cheap answer is right there and it feels satisfying. Humans are hypocrites, case closed, next topic.



Corn

And it is satisfying. That's what makes it dangerous.



Herman

It's satisfying the way calling a movie bad is satisfying. You don't have to engage with anything. But when you actually go looking, this is a measurable phenomenon. There's data. Decades of it. And the data says something much stranger than "people are hypocrites."



Corn

Stranger how?



Herman

Stranger in that the people who know the most are sometimes the worst at following their own advice. Not the ignorant ones. The experts.



Corn

That's backwards from what you'd expect.



Herman

It's completely backwards from what I'd expect. And it holds up across professions. Medicine, dentistry, and the tech world has its own version that nobody's really quantified but everybody recognizes.



Corn

So walk me through it. Where does the hypocrisy story fall apart?



Herman

Start with the physicians. A survey of physician faculty out of the University of Alberta, published in Canadian Family Physician back in 2016. They asked these doctors about their own health behaviors, and the numbers are grim. Only 10.8% were eating the recommended daily servings of fruits and vegetables.



Corn

Ten point eight.



Herman

Less than half did vigorous physical activity three or more days a week. 47.2%. And 42.9% reported more than two hours of daily screen time.



Corn

Those are not doctor numbers. Those are my numbers.



Herman

And yet 63.3% of them believed they were role models for a healthy lifestyle. Nearly two-thirds looked at their own habits and concluded, yes, patients should be emulating this.



Corn

That's the part that gets me. It's not that they're failing. It's that they don't know they're failing.



Herman

Well, here's where it gets better. The same study found something the authors didn't expect. Poor personal habits correlated with *less* patient counseling. Doctors with low fruit and vegetable intake counseled their patients less about smoking, less about alcohol, less about diet. All three were statistically significant.



Corn

So they're not just failing to practice what they preach. They're preaching less because they're failing.



Herman

Which makes a kind of sense, if you think about it. You don't want to stand in front of a patient and tell them to eat better when you had a bag of chips for lunch.



Corn

That's guilt doing the work. Not ignorance.



Herman

The authors put it almost exactly that way. They wrote that physicians might counsel patients less frequently on the lifestyle guidelines they themselves aren't meeting. "Do as I say, not as I do" is in the paper, verbatim.



Corn

So the doctor who skips the diet conversation isn't lazy. He's protecting himself.



Herman

And it gets sharper when you look outside North America. There was an Israeli study, February 2024, comparing healthcare workers to the general public. And the physicians and interns came out at the bottom.



Corn

The bottom of their own profession?



Herman

Only 10.6% of physicians and interns scored high on a healthy lifestyle index. Compare that to 34.5% for other health professionals. Nurses, technicians, physiotherapists. The doctors were the unhealthiest group in the building.



Corn

That's a striking finding.



Herman

76.6% of them were sleeping less than seven hours a night. 41.3% ate breakfast less than once a week. And 51.1% underwent screening tests only "to a small extent."



Corn

Screening for what?



Herman

General preventive screening. And here's the kicker. In a cited Israeli study, 94% of physicians said they believed in the importance of screening. 94%. And yet half of them barely do it themselves.



Corn

They believe it. They just don't do it.



Herman

And 81% of healthcare workers said they'd recommend healthy lifestyle behaviors to their patients "to a great extent." So the message is strong. The practice is not.



Corn

So the belief is intact. The knowledge is intact. The behavior is missing.



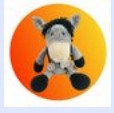
Herman

Which is where dentistry comes in. Because the dentist-and-soda joke Daniel made? That one has actual data behind it. A 2024 study of 842 dental professionals in Thailand. They measured knowledge, attitude, and dietary behavior. And they found that knowledge had almost no relationship to actual dietary behavior. The correlation was basically zero. r equals 0.031.



Corn

That's nothing.



Herman

That's statistically indistinguishable from nothing. What predicted healthy eating wasn't what they knew. It was their attitude. Their disposition toward the behavior. And the paper notes that prior studies had found dentists are *more* likely to consume sugary foods between meals than the general population.



Corn

So the people who spend their lives telling you to stop eating sugar are eating more sugar than you are.



Herman

Between meals, specifically. Which is the worst time. That's the caricature Daniel described, and it's documented.



Corn

I want to sit with that for a second. Because knowledge isn't just failing to help. It's almost orthogonal to the outcome.



Herman

Which raises a question. If information doesn't drive behavior, what does?



Corn

Before you answer that, I want to bring in the study that broke my brain on this.



Herman

Go on.



Corn

Because I always assumed the reason people don't follow health advice is that they don't understand it. If that were true, then the people who understand it best would follow it most closely. And that's exactly what the researchers assumed going in. There's a paper by economists at MIT, Stanford, and Harvard called "A Taste of Their Own Medicine."



Herman

Finkelstein and Polyakova. I know this one.



Corn

Published in American Economic Review: Insights in December 2022. They got access to Swedish administrative data. 2005 through 2016. 5.8 million people. And they tracked adherence to 63 different prescription drug guidelines.



Herman

This is the one that should have gotten more attention.



Corn

The general population followed the guidelines 54.4% of the time. And doctors and their close family members?



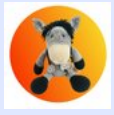
Herman

They followed them less.



Corn

3.8 percentage points less. In 41 of the 63 guidelines, doctors and their families were *less* compliant than the public. Less.



Herman

The antibiotic gap is the one that stayed with me. Doctors and their families were 5.2 percentage points less compliant on antibiotics.



Corn

And the explanation the researchers got to is not ignorance. It's the opposite of ignorance. Amy Finkelstein put it well. She said you can imagine the reason doctors are less likely to follow the guidelines than other patients is because they know there's a wedge between what's good for them as patients and what's good for society.



Herman

So the guideline says take the narrow-spectrum antibiotic. Because if everyone takes the broad one, we breed resistance and it stops working for everybody. But if *you* take the broad one, your infection clears faster.



Corn

It's a classic collective action problem, and the doctors see it clearly. They know what they're supposed to do. And then they know what they'd rather do.



Herman

Maria Polyakova put it another way. She said experts have a more nuanced understanding of what's right for themselves, and how that might differ from what the guidelines suggest. That's a generous reading, but I think it's the right one.



Corn

The doctors aren't failing to follow the science. They're following a more complete version of it. One that includes their own individual interests.



Herman

Which is why the word "hypocrite" falls apart here. A hypocrite is someone who says one thing and does another while pretending not to notice. The Swedish doctors noticed. They made a calculation.



Corn

That's the moment I stopped thinking of this as a character flaw. It's a rational decision. A self-aware one.



Herman

And once you see it that way, the whole category opens up. There are at least two kinds of this pattern, and we conflate them constantly.



Corn

You mean the "learn from my mistakes" type and the "rules for thee and not for me" type.



Herman

The first is the recovering alcoholic who tells you to slow down. He knows where the road leads because he's been on it. He's not being a hypocrite. He's giving you his scar tissue as a warning.



Corn

And the second?



Herman

That's the politician who legislates the thing he exempted himself from. The executive who tells the company one thing and does another. Those are not the same.



Corn

One is a gift. The other is a bill you didn't order.



Herman

I'd put the doctor who doesn't get his colonoscopy and still tells you to get yours in the first category. The doctor who prescribes himself the broad-spectrum antibiotic while telling everyone else to take the narrow one? That's the second category.



Corn

So does that help us sort the tech worker who thinks his own product is garbage?



Herman

It might. Because the tech angle is the one nobody's actually studied. I couldn't find a single peer-reviewed paper quantifying whether engineers use their own products. So we're in anecdote territory.



Corn

That's fine. Anecdotes can still be honest.



Herman

But the pattern shows up everywhere. There's a good Hacker News discussion about this, where someone points out the two varieties. Then another commenter brings up Bill Gates and his private jets while he lectures about climate.



Corn

That's a real one. He's not wrong about the problem, but the messenger is vulnerable.



Herman

Then there's the NASA human-rating standards. Engineers designing the systems make decisions about human tolerance that they'll never personally have to live with. The people actually flying the vehicle are a different set of humans entirely.



Corn

There's a version of this in software that I think is underrated.



Herman

Go on.



Corn

The engineers building a notification system that pings you constantly. They hate being pinged. They know the notification system is hostile. And they build it anyway because the product manager says the metrics need it.



Herman

That's the same wedge. The engineer knows the product is bad for users. He just has a different incentive than the user does.



Corn

So the tech worker who thinks the entire business is a bunch of crap isn't necessarily a hypocrite. He's inside a system where his incentives point away from what he'd recommend to a friend.



Herman

That's a cleaner explanation than "he's a hypocrite." It's more uncomfortable, too. Because it suggests a lot of people are doing work they wouldn't recommend.



Corn

The tension between what you do for pay and what you'd endorse as a human being.



Herman

Every industry has that tension. Not every industry has the data to prove it.



Corn

So let's get to the psychology. Because the data shows the what. The why is where I think Daniel's question gets interesting.



Herman

The why has a name. The intention-behavior gap.



Corn

Sheeran and Webb. Right?



Herman

Right. It's the observation that humans routinely fail to do what they intend. Not what they want to want. What they actually intend to do. And the failure isn't rare. It's the norm.



Corn

How big is the gap?



Herman

There's a study on colorectal cancer screening that puts a number on it. They looked at people who said they intended to get screened. Who'd made the decision. And 71% of those intenders failed to follow through.



Corn

Seventy-one percent of the people who'd decided to do a thing didn't do it.



Herman

Which means "I intended to" is barely a predictor of anything. And the gap correlates with traits like self-control and executive function. People with lower executive function show a bigger gap. It's not willpower in the abstract. It's a measurable cognitive capacity.



Corn

That's worth flagging for anyone who thinks this is a moral failing. It's partly neurological.



Herman

And there's a related finding that's more unsettling. The self-other asymmetry.



Corn

Meaning we judge ourselves differently than we judge other people.



Herman

There's a 2007 study out of Northeastern. Valdesolo and DeSteno. They gave subjects a task where one participant would get the easy version and one would get the hard version. 88% of the subjects assigned themselves the easy one.



Corn

That's not a majority. That's a near-unanimous finding of cheating.



Herman

Then the interesting part. Subjects were asked to judge their own choice, and then judge an identical choice made by a stranger. And they rated their own transgression far more leniently. They extended the same leniency to members of even trivially-formed in-groups.



Corn

So if the person rigging the task was on their team, they got a pass. If they were a stranger, crime.



Herman

DeSteno's conclusion was that this bias is fundamental. It's not that people are lying. It's that the mind is inherently social, and left unchecked, it will bias judgment in the service of ourselves and those like us.



Corn

Which is a slightly chilling sentence when you sit with it.



Herman

Because it means the same brain that gives you accurate judgment about other people will bend when it's pointed at yourself. But systematically.



Corn

There's another piece here I want to bring in. The "action hypocrisy" research.



Herman

Construal-level theory.



Corn

Explain it. Because I think this is the answer to Daniel's specific question. The one about teaching without practicing.



Herman

The idea is that psychological distance changes how we think about a behavior. When something is far away. In the future. Or in another person. We construe it abstractly. As an ideal. As the right thing to do.



Corn

And when it's close?



Herman

When it's near. Now. In your own life. You construe it concretely. As constraints. As friction. As what's actually possible in this moment.



Corn

So the recommendation lives in the abstract world and the action lives in the concrete one.



Herman

There are six studies supporting this. People are more willing to recommend an action for themselves in the future than for themselves in the present. And they're more willing to recommend it for distant others than for people close to them.



Corn

So the reason I can teach what I can't do is that teaching happens in the world of ideals and doing happens in the world of trade-offs.



Herman

Which is why the person who knows the most is sometimes the worst off. Because they can see both worlds clearly. The ideal and the compromise.



Corn

That's a real thing. I've felt that.



Herman

You've said that about your own habits.



Corn

Well. I have a complicated relationship with napping.



Herman

That is a sentence.



Corn

It's the only kind of relationship I have.



Herman

But there's one more piece of this that flips the lot. Because the research on induced hypocrisy suggests the discomfort might actually be useful.



Corn

The Priolo meta-analysis.



Herman

2019. Thirty-eight studies, published and unpublished. They looked at what happens when you make people's hypocrisy salient in a specific way. The procedure has two steps. First, you have people advocate for a standard. They make the case for a behavior publicly. Then, second, you remind them of a time they violated that standard themselves.



Corn

And they change?



Herman

Both intention and behavior increase. Reliably across studies. So hypocrisy isn't just a failure mode. It's a motivator. If you can make the gap vivid enough, people will close it.



Corn

So the discomfort of noticing your own preach-practice gap is not a bug.



Herman

It's the mechanism. It's exactly what gets people to act.



Corn

Which is a completely different frame than "hypocrites are bad." It says noticing your own inconsistency is the thing that saves you.



Herman

And that leads to a stranger implication. Daniel called this an ancient tendency. I couldn't find a single evolutionary-psychology paper that nailed all of it down. But the components of it. The intention-behavior gap. The self-other asymmetry. Those are treated by the field as fundamental features of human cognition. Not bugs in a few people. Architecture.



Corn

Which means "why are we hypocrites" is asking the wrong question.



Herman

What should we ask?



Corn

What is the gap between knowing and doing trying to tell us? Because if the gap is universal, and if the discomfort it causes is what moves us, then the gap is doing work. It's not just failure.



Herman

That's a strong reframe.



Corn

It's the one I'm landing on. Anyway. Let's hear what he thinks about all this.



Hilbert

Corn. When you said the doctors weren't hypocrites, they made a calculation. My cousin is a dental hygienist. She's been on a one-woman campaign against energy drinks since 2011. She'll corner you at a barbecue and tell you what phosphoric acid does to enamel. Two weeks ago I was at her house. She opened the garage to get a shovel. There is a mini-fridge in there. It is a monument to Mountain Dew. Six flavors. I counted.



Corn

That's a beautiful contradiction.



Hilbert

It's not a contradiction. She says she's not a hypocrite. She's a warning. She knows exactly what she's doing.



Herman

Did she say that to you?



Hilbert

She said it to me at a family barbecue in 2019. She cracked open a can and looked at nobody in particular and said, this is why I tell people not to do this. And she meant it. She wasn't joking.



Corn

So she's not in denial. She's making her failing part of the lesson.



Hilbert

That's what she says. She's a walking cautionary tale. I asked her how many she drinks a day. She said she doesn't count them. That would be obsessive.



Herman

Which is a very specific kind of self-management.



Hilbert

She has a spreadsheet.



Corn

Of course she does.



Hilbert

I've seen it. It tracks by brand. By flavor. There's a column called mouthfeel rating. She grades them on mouthfeel. From one to ten.



Herman

A mouthfeel column.



Hilbert

There's a pivot table for monthly totals. And a tab for seasonal comparisons. And then, on the far right, there's a column she calls regret level. One to ten. She fills it in retroactively on Sunday evenings. She calls the whole ritual her weekly reckoning.



Corn

So she tracks the regret, not the drinking.



Hilbert

She tracks the regret. The drinking she says she doesn't count. Six flavors in the fridge. Different data.



Herman

That's a surprisingly clean version of the thing we were just talking about.



Hilbert

She hits a one-to-ten regret number on her own spreadsheet every Sunday and then opens the fridge again Monday. She's not confused about what's happening. She's just not doing anything about it. Which I think is closer to how it goes than most people want to admit.



Corn

That story doesn't resolve the question. It just makes it more specific.



Herman

Which is what we needed. Alright. So what do we do with this? Because the picture that's built up over the last hour is not the picture I started with.



Corn

Same. The cheap version. "Humans are hypocrites." It doesn't survive contact with the data. The Swedish doctors weren't lying. They were making a different calculation based on better information. The dentists weren't ignorant. Their knowledge just didn't predict their behavior at all. The health workers believed in screening at 94% while half of them skipped it.



Herman

And the doctors who counsel less because they're failing personally. That's not deception. That's the self-other asymmetry playing out in real time.



Corn

The question that stays with me is the one about how we receive advice. Because if experts deviate because they know something the rest of us don't, then the guideline and the person aren't the same thing. The guideline is written for the average case. The expert is looking at you.



Herman

Which means the guidance and the guide diverge. And it's not always obvious which one to trust.



Corn

The guideline doesn't know you. The expert might.



Herman

Of course, the expert might also just be rationalizing. So it's not a clean rule.



Corn

Nothing in this episode has been clean. That's the point. The word "hypocrisy" doesn't survive contact with the reality, and the reality is more interesting anyway. Our friend Hilbert's cousin with her spreadsheet isn't confused about her soda habit. She has data. She just doesn't act on it. And the fact that she tracks the regret at all suggests she knows something is off, and the knowing is what will eventually do the work.



Herman

Or what keeps her awake on Sunday nights.



Corn

That too. But the induced-hypocrisy work is real. Making the gap vivid changes behavior. You can't fix what you don't see.



Herman

The cleaner way to put it. Maybe the question isn't "why are we hypocrites." It's "what is the gap between knowing and doing trying to tell us." And the answer might be. It's telling us what we actually believe when the abstract version has to meet a Tuesday afternoon.



Corn

That's a landing. Let's take it.



Herman

That was episode 5877 of My Weird Prompts. Thanks as always to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop. If you want to send us a prompt of your own, you can reach the Telegram bot at t dot me slash MWP listener bot. That's where Daniel's prompts come in.



Corn

The show is at my weird prompts dot com. Feed, archives, all of it.



Herman

We'll be back soon.



Corn

See you then.

SOURCES

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