



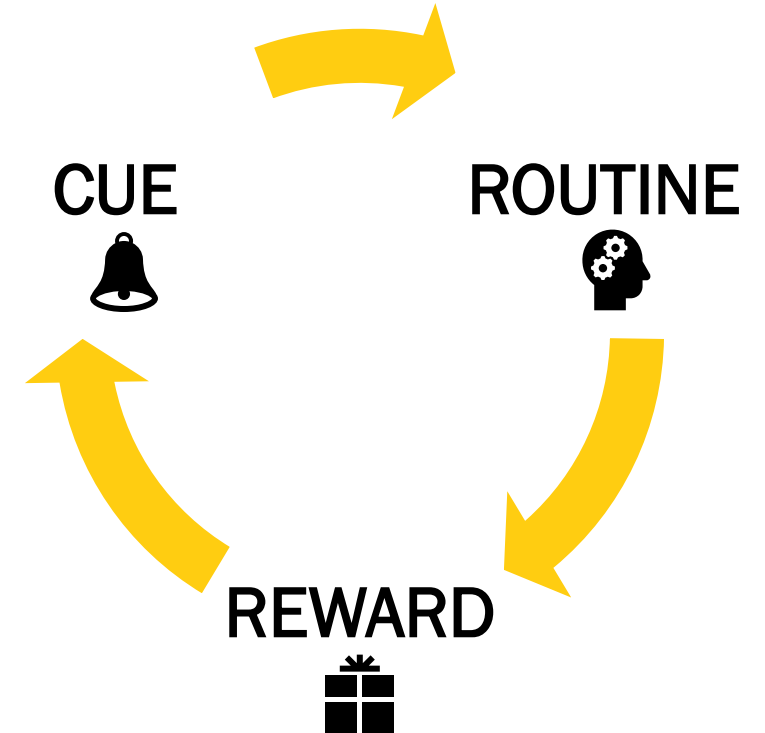
Understanding Habits

What Are Habits?

- Habits are patterns of behaviors that govern our everyday life
- About 40% of our daily “decisions” aren’t really decisions at all—they are habits
- The more routine and repeated a behavior becomes, the less mental energy goes into it
 - In other words, we are on “auto pilot”
- Some habits are fragile and may fall apart quickly, even when we make small changes (cues eliminated and/or weak rewards)
- You can consciously take control of setting up the habits that serve you

The “Habit Loop”

- Habit formation and endurance involve three main components:
 1. **A cue** – The trigger for a behavior to start. Something that makes the behavior seemingly automatic. Cues can trigger both positive (desirable) and negative (less desirable) behaviors.
 2. **A routine** – The habitual behavior. Patterns of thoughts and behaviors that are repeated.
 3. **A reward** – Something that reinforces the behavior and helps the brain remember the behavior.



Cues

Cues are essential in habit formation. All habitual behaviors are triggered by one or more conditions:

- **A location** (e.g., you walk into work, see someone brought cookies, so you eat one)
- **A time of the day** (e.g., you take a daily coffee break at 10am)
- **An emotional reaction** (e.g., you're at home bored, so you log into Facebook)
- **Someone else's behavior** (e.g., your friend orders a cocktail at dinner, so you follow suit)
- **Another behavior that precedes the habit** (e.g., changing out of work clothes and into workout clothes each evening before exercising)

Rewards

- Rewards can be just about anything that:
 1. Brings us pleasure or some desired outcome
 2. Helps us avoid an unpleasant or undesired outcome
- We experience a reward when the **pleasure center** of the brain is activated—one or more of 8+ neurotransmitters are released into our brain including dopamine, serotonin, endorphins, oxytocin, GABA, norepinephrine, etc.
- **Different behaviors** activate the pleasure center of the brain differently (e.g., flossing once doesn't produce the same reward as eating a piece of chocolate)
- A behavior can become a powerful habit when repeatedly reinforced by **multiple rewards** (e.g., taking a coffee break during the workday = time with others, mood-altering, break from work, structures time, introduces perspective, etc.)

Craving, Willpower, and Keystone Habits

There are three other important variables in the habit loop that help sustain our habits over time: **craving**, **willpower**, and **keystone habits**.

1. Craving

- Initially, the cue triggers the behavior which activates the pleasure center of the brain and the release of the neurotransmitters
- With repetition, the cue itself then activates the pleasure center of the brain and the neurotransmitter release—we know the reward is coming
 - This is experienced as a *craving* (e.g., thinking about being in a casino (cue) itself can activate the pleasure center of the brain)

Craving, Willpower, and Keystone Habits

2. Willpower

- Willpower is the ability to endure and navigate obstacles and barriers
- Willpower is particularly important when establishing new habits or trying to change existing habits
- Behaviors become habits over time when we identify barriers and obstacles and prepare for them by consciously setting up triggers and rewards (e.g., I know if I go into a bar (cue), I'll likely have a drink; instead, I'll stay out of bars)
- Willpower jumpstarts the change which habits sustain!

Craving, Willpower, and Keystone Habits

3. Keystone Habits

- A keystone habit is a small habit that triggers (cues) another habit
- Sometimes keystone habits are small behaviors that enable a larger behavior, goal, or behavioral change
- These can act like a chain reaction—a series of small behaviors that are linked
- Often one behavior in the link can be changed and trigger a larger behavioral change
- Example: Food journaling is a small behavior known to impact diet and eating behaviors
- Example: Small efforts to increase physical activity, like standing up at your desk, parking at the back of the lot, or taking the stairs, can trigger more exercise and improve health

Changing Habits

Altering the current, adding the new, and eliminating the old

Since so much of our lives is governed by habits, it's important to become more mindful of our habits and take ourselves off "auto pilot." Doing so allows us to be more aware of the habits we want to keep, habits we want to edit, habits we want to eliminate, and new habits we'd like to adopt.

Here are some steps to help evaluate your habits and begin to make some changes:

- Take a habit inventory
- Check your readiness and prepare for behavior change
- Identify a habit you want to change—diagnose that habit
- Make a plan
- Build willpower
- Add accountability checks to sustain the change



Take a Habit Inventory

Remember, habits are automatic. We lose mindfulness of many of our behaviors and the positive/negative impact on us. We must become mindful of our habits. Ask yourself:

- What behaviors are serving my best interests? What's working for me? What's not?
- What are the behaviors or habits I'd like to change?
- What do I want to start or do more of?
- What do I want to stop or do less of?
- Label them: *Keep, eliminate, or start new*
- Learn about the pros and cons of a habit you may want to add, eliminate, or change. Many people are uninformed about the risks and benefits of some behaviors (e.g., diet, sleep habits, blood pressure, addictive behaviors)

Check Your Readiness and Prepare for Behavior Change

Behaviors are easier to change when we are informed and prepared. Ask yourself:

- What is the need for making a change? What's driving the need for change?
- What are the pros and cons of the change?
- How does my current state serve me? Even bad habits are being rewarded, so what will I gain by not making the change?
- How will making the change be rewarding to me in the future? What do I have to gain?
- What may happen if I do not make the change?
- What sort of preparation do I need to do?
- What are my barriers to making the change?
- What's my plan for taking action?
- What sort of rewards can I be guaranteed will happen if I establish a new habit or eliminate an old one? What reward do I need to build in?
- How will I respond to obstacles? What is my plan for navigating and overcoming those obstacles?
- How will I manage relapses into old behaviors when they happen?

Diagnose the Habit

After you've identified the behavior you want to change, diagnose the habit. Remember, habits are fragile, so small changes to the cues or rewards can have a ripple effect across the behaviors. Start by examining the routine. Look for triggering cues and rewards. To reengineer a habit you have, be mindful and begin thinking again—go off auto pilot.

- Look for the cues. This is essential in order to understand what's triggering the behavior and helps guide your action-planning for the new habit.
- Track the following:
 - What is the location of the behavior?
 - What time does it occur?
 - How do I feel physically? What are the emotions associated with the behavior?
 - What are other people doing that is associated with my habit?
 - What are my behaviors that lead up to the cue?
- Examine your cravings. Be mindful that the cue itself may be driving your habit. How do you feel when faced with the cue? How would it feel to change your response to the cue?
- Examine how you are being rewarded. What pleasure do you receive? Or, what unpleasant response are you avoiding?

Make a Plan

Altering the cue and the reward can help change the behavior.

- Test your cravings. When confronted with a cue, slow down to recognize how you feel. Experiment by not doing the habitual behavior. Or try something different, even if it's a small change.
- Try changing or avoiding the cue. Alter your routine. Change up your location. Examine how your emotions and relationships are impacting your behavior. Even small changes make a difference.
- While the old reward can still help with the new habit, try finding a new reward for the new habit.
- Clarify the primary reward. Try alternative rewards for the new behavior. Or if you are eliminating an old habit, try seeking that reward without engaging in the old, bad habit (e.g., take a break from work and socialize while cutting out the smoking).



Build Willpower

Remember, willpower helps prevent us from getting derailed and sustain the desired habit. Willpower comes with planning and preparation.

- Take inventory of the obstacles to the new cue, behavior, or reward.
- Will you recognize the obstacle when it arrives? List the obstacle and when, where, and how it will arise.
- What impact will the obstacle have on your new habit? Will the obstacle endure or pass quickly? Consider if you will need to tolerate the obstacle or work to resolve it.
- What is your plan to manage the obstacle? How easy will it be to tolerate while you are taking action to resolve the obstacle?
- What additional external resources might you need to help address barriers to your new habit?

Add Accountability Checks to Sustain the Change

Remember, habits typically go unnoticed on a daily basis. You will want to plant objective triggers or schedule time to “take stock” and evaluate your habits. This likely won’t happen automatically, leaving you at risk for lapsing back into old habits or failing to sustain the new habit.

- Create new cues for doing your habit inventory. Put something on your schedule or build self-reflection into your routine.
- List which habits are “on the table.”
- Take an honest look at whether you’ve sustained the new behavior. Has it become a new habit?
- Where are there barriers that took you off track?
- Evaluate what is working for you and what may need some change.
- Start your inventory again.

The Golden Rule of Habits

- Sometimes it is necessary to alter cues and rewards.
- Whenever possible, seek to *understand* your cues and rewards.
- But keep them in place and put them to work for you.
- Invest your energy into changing the routine.
- Allow the existing cue to trigger the new behavior.
- Leave the existing reward in place to reinforce the new habit.



Recommended Reading

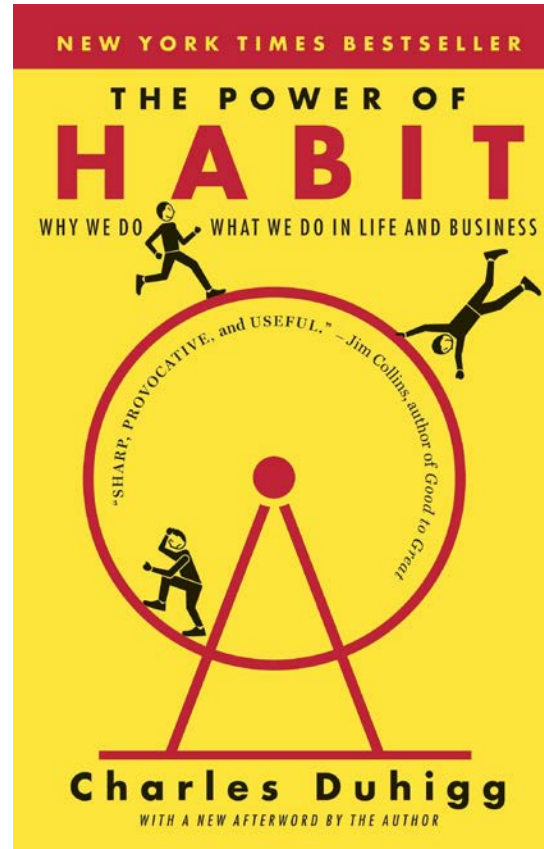


Image Source: Amazon (www.amazon.com)

Total health



Emotional



Financial



Physical



Purpose



Social