



Habits

Habits exist to support decision-making processes. It is a way to automate decisions to preserve mental energy for more important decision-making. Habits are a cornerstone in health behavior change that either inhibit or promote the decisions you make regarding your health goals.

HABIT BASICS

Habits exist to relieve the mental load needed for decision-making. They are routines that are practiced regularly and aid in automating decision behaviors that would otherwise require significant mental energy. Our brains are inclined to turn regularly practiced routines into habits to automate and reduce mental energy needed each time the decision is made.

Habits can be positively reinforced, negatively reinforced, or both. For example, putting your seatbelt on as soon as you sit down in your car is positively reinforced by the promise of better outcomes should an accident occur. But it is also negatively reinforced by getting a ticket and a hefty fine if you are pulled over without being buckled up.

Habits are broken down into three parts: Cue, Routine, and Reward.

- **Cue**

A stimulus that triggers a behavior. Cues are a trigger that create a craving for a routine/reward. Some cues are obvious, like waking up, going to the bathroom, and brushing teeth. Others are less obvious, like hitting an afternoon lull and mindlessly rifling through the pantry at 3pm every day. Cues can be based upon:

- 1 | Time (I do the laundry on Monday evenings)
- 2 | Location or environment (When I am in the checkout aisle, I grab the Kit Kat bar)
- 3 | Event order (when I hear my phone ding, I check my text messages)
- 4 | Feelings/emotions (I am feeling bored, so I will scroll Instagram or Tik Tok)
- 5 | Social influence (dinners with friends often mean overeating and overdrinking)

- **Routine**

In the context of habits, the term routine is the behavior that is connected to, and occurs after, the cue. Of the previous 5 examples, the underlined behavior is the routine:

- 1 | I do the laundry on Monday evenings
- 2 | When I am in the checkout aisle, I grab the Kit Kat bar
- 3 | When I hear my phone ding, I check my text messages
- 4 | I am feeling bored, so I will scroll Instagram or Tik Tok
- 5 | Dinners with friends often mean overeating and overdrinking

- **Reward**

The reward is what occurs after the behavior is performed and what reinforces the behavior. On the surface, the reward seems relatively straight forward. However, a large part of habit change requires significant attention to the depth and breadth of the reward. For example, having a cigarette with colleagues during a work break may both be a reward for addictive inclinations but it also is quality time spent with friends, a break from stress, and an environmental change. Breaking down rewards into smaller parts helps understand how to rewire the routine to still achieve the desired reward.

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.” (Will Durant famously rephrased a powerful Aristotle quote).

HABIT STACKING

Creating or correcting habits does not have to start from scratch. Habits exist all around us, and many of them are good! You brush your teeth and you wash your hands after using the restroom. These habits are prime opportunities to tag along another habit you are interested in adopting. With a strongly established positive habit (like brushing your teeth), the cue to brush can also be a cue to do a breathing exercise or to repeat positive mantras. By piggybacking on a preexisting habit, the new habit can take shape alongside the already established CRR.

HOW DO I ADOPT A NEW HABIT ON ITS OWN?

Research suggests two things: one, it could take just 18 days to establish a new habit. Think: putting your left shoe on before your right shoe. Minimal friction, minimal emotion, and an habit that you are tweaking. But it could also take upwards of 256 days. Think: switching to a primarily plant-based diet. Lots of friction, lots of peripheral emotion (I can't go to dinner with my friends, there aren't any food options at that restaurant I can eat). And two, old habits are not deleted. They forever remain in your brain's rolodex of shortcuts it might be able to deploy if the time is right.

But not all hope is lost! Our habits on habit change are what need some attention. Instead of trying to add a new behavior like a specific diet or exercise program, a meditation practice, or stopping coffee cold turkey, try these steps:

- 1 | Identify the behavior you wish to adopt or the behavior you would

like to change. Write it out, speak it out loud. How does it make you feel? Are you confident in your ability to change? What could you do to increase your confidence level?

2| Consider the entire Cue-Routine-Reward cycle to break down each component. Can you alter the cue? Can you achieve the reward with a substitute behavior? Can you habit stack?

3| Focus on supporting the hard days instead of the easy ones. This idea is about raising the floor instead of raising the ceiling. You are already doing great on your good days! It's the days under stress that require support. What actions can you put in place before those moments occur?

4| Fail forward. Accept that you will not be perfect 100% of the time. In fact, plan for it. Shoot for 80% adherence to allow yourself some wiggle room. Allowing mistakes to be a part of the journey will keep you from derailing at the first sign of struggle.

5| It's not all or nothing. Have backup plans in place when life throws you a curveball. Give yourself some grace then move onto the next best habit. Didn't get your meditation in while brushing your teeth? That's ok. You know you have your commute as a backup option.

5| Small steps yield big results. Smaller, more manageable habit change have a much better chance at success than large, overhaul changes. Can you break down your desired outcome into smaller, achievable habits?

