

The Power of Habit Summary

By Charles Duhigg

Have you ever tried to give something up that you think, or even *know* is bad for you? Maybe it's cigarettes, unhealthy snacking, social media, or biting your nails? We all have habits that we wish we could kick, and occasionally we may try to change our behavior. If you look at the success rate of New Year's resolutions, you'll be painfully aware of how difficult it is to edit ingrained habits. But, are all habits worth ditching?

The Power of Habit examines the science behind habit. While we all have bad habits we'd like to ditch; we're shown how habit is central to everything. Forming healthy and effective habits are one of the most crucial things needed to succeed in business and everyday life.

Charles Duhigg is a bestselling American author and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist. He's developed the key insights from *The Power of Habit*, to form a training program that teaches positive habit-forming techniques. The lessons from *The Power of Habit* are about recognizing and nurturing good habits, and changing those self-destructive habits that negatively affect us.

We'll briefly examine the book's main ideas, including the habit loop, keystone habits, and the golden rule of habits and habit change.

Those Things We Hardly Notice

Did you know that 40% of the decisions that we make on a daily basis are habitual? So much of what we do is based on routine.

So, why do we have habits? Well, our brains are committed to being efficient, and they will do whatever they can to become more efficient. Habits all begin as decisions, and then through willpower, they develop into actions that we perform habitually.

Our morning routine is an excellent example to illustrate how much of our lives are habit-driven. What is your morning routine?

It's likely that in the first 30 minutes of your day, you perform a lot of little acts on "autopilot." You may make hundreds of seemingly small and insignificant decisions without even thinking about them. Small acts such as putting on the kettle or starting the coffee machine, switching on lights, washing your face, and brushing your teeth, are things that we do automatically. Sometimes these actions are cued by a timeframe, and sometimes they may just be an automatic response that's evolved throughout our lives. The brain is naturally predisposed to create habits so that it doesn't have to work as hard. Our brains don't distinguish between good and bad habits; they just strive to form habits out of repetitive behavior.

There are obviously good and bad aspects to habit. Therefore, understanding how habits are formed is pivotal to understanding how we can optimize our behavior. Whether we want to rid ourselves of unhealthy habits, or develop healthier habits, it's useful to know the science and psychology around habit formation.

The Three Steps To Highly-Successful Habit

Formation

To harness the power of habit, or to recognize those habits which have negative consequences, we need to be cognizant of our daily actions.

How exactly do we create habits?

Habit is based on three concepts, namely cue, routine, and reward. Cues trigger us to want to do something; they can be subtle reminders or very obvious prompts. Routine happens as a result of physically, mentally, or emotionally committing to acting on the cues. Finally, the reward is the feeling, or payback we get from doing something, which ultimately makes the habit stick. We often crave the reward that we obtain from habitual acts, and this has both positive and negative aspects depending on the act itself.

The typical example is exercise. Getting into the routine and habit of exercise can often be tricky. If you think about how many gym memberships are dormant, you'll know how good intentions and motivational pep talks don't create habits. Duhigg says we need to go through cue, routine, and reward, to create sustainable and lasting habits. So, a quick and easy cue to develop is, before you go to bed, put your exercise clothes in your line of sight. This means that when you wake up, they will be one of the first things you see. Once you put on your exercise kit, you're a step closer to doing exercise. Cues encourage us to get into routines, and once we've completed the exercise, we'll feel the reward. When it comes to exercise, the satisfaction comes from having done the work, feeling healthy, achieving fitness goals, and those wonderful endorphins.

You can probably see how this cycle also works with bad habits. Anyone who has ever tried to give up, or has given up smoking, will know that there are many cues that are reminders of smoking and can lead to significant cravings. Humans are highly suggestible, and so we may associate cigarettes with morning coffee, or a glass of wine in the evening, or even the "smoke break" at work. Sometimes, just seeing other people smoking can be a reminder of the habit and can cue the routine.

Duhigg explains that the key to making something habitual is to create a "habit loop." He says, 'The cue and reward become neurologically intertwined until a sense of craving emerges.'

Cravings are interesting because they rely on gratification, and can be instant or delayed. Duhigg argues that craving reinforces habits because they're the "anticipation of a reward." You want to get to the point where you crave positive actions, and can resist the craving for negative actions.

If it's something positive that benefits you physically, emotionally, or mentally, then you need to work out how to nurture and cultivate this. However, if it's a harmful habit, there are ways to rid ourselves of these habits and develop new ones. Being aware of the habit cycle allows us to be a lot more self-aware and mindful when it comes to analyzing how and why we build and break habits. The good news is that habits are malleable, and you can create a new habit from an old one.

Creating Good Habits From Bad Habits

What's the thing that you find yourself craving the most?

Perhaps you have a very sweet tooth and crave cookies a lot? Maybe you're the type of person who buys a box of cookies and ends up eating them all in a day or two? The cue that leads to you eating the cookies might be that you see them in the shop, and they're part of a two-for-one special. Maybe you always have cookies in your kitchen cupboard or cookie jar? Perhaps you're susceptible to seeing people eat cookies on television? You may have even built a routine around eating cookies, where you associate them with a cup of tea or coffee, or a glass of milk. Eventually, you may develop a habit around these routines, where it gets to the stage where you think you can't go without having a cookie *and* a cup of tea or coffee. Hence, cravings develop.

The imagined pleasure we derive from something is often greater than the thing itself. How often have you been disappointed or underwhelmed by a slice of cake, or even forgotten munching through half a box of cookies? Habitual behavior isn't mindful, it's automatic, and so often we don't actually pay attention to these little acts.

By way of illustrating this, how often do you check your phone every day? And are you mindful every time that you look at your phone?

Habits become ingrained, and therefore we're not always fully aware that we're doing things. The good news is that scientific research reveals that there are ways to change and adapt habits, and that we can create new habits out of old ones.

The most obvious thing is recognizing the habits that you want to change and then identifying the cues that trigger the habit. This really comes down to mindfulness. We need to be mindful of our habits and behaviors, mindful of what triggers us, and mindful of the reasons as to why we

crave a particular habit. Duhigg suggests that we ask ourselves "Why," at least five times, so that we get to the root of what drives our habits. Usually, they're tied to feelings of depression, anxiety, loneliness, or boredom, so it's vital to identify what emotions are aligned to certain behaviors.

This is the easy part.

The tricky part is actually changing the routine. For anyone who has ever tried to kick a habit like over-eating, giving up cigarettes, or alcohol, you'll know just how tough it is. It's most difficult when we're triggered by a cue, such as seeing others enjoying a habit that you've tried to eliminate. Falling off the wagon is a common outcome of trying to kick a habit, because our brains are hardwired around habits.

Stress is also a huge factor in triggering those bad yet comforting habits. Willpower can be strengthened by sticking to a routine. This can be seen in the case of Starbucks. Starbucks employees are trained to be incredibly cheerful, smile broadly, and greet customers in a certain way. However, things don't always go as planned, and often, customers complained and became aggressive, which resulted in the cheerful baristas losing their cool. The Starbucks executives came up with a way to mitigate incidents by training their employees to deal very specifically with stress. This targeted training means that it's implausible to see a Starbucks barista flustered because they're in the habit of staying cool, calm, and collected.

While identifying triggers and how we react in specific scenarios is vital, we also need to have autonomy over our habits. Behavior changes have to be self-imposed. We need to decide to want to change. Therefore, the key is replacing bad habits with good habits so we're still getting rewards

while also being productive.

Duhigg suggests that we develop ourselves around what he calls keystone habits.

Building the Architecture Around Keystone Habits

What are keystone habits?

Those familiar with architecture will know that when you build an arch, there's a central stone or brick that supports the entire structure. The same applies to habits. Small habits are generally built around one prominent habit. For example, exercise is one of the most crucial habits that we can develop because it has such a positive knock-on effect.

Exercise isn't just about looking good and having the perfect body. Research shows that exercise is a massive catalyst and driver of good habits, and that exercising just once a week has a significant impact on overall wellbeing. Exercise motivates getting more rest, eating healthier, and having a more focused mindset. Exercise helps us to commit, not only to the exercise routine itself, but to a range of other areas in our lives. One of the things that we can all do is do more exercise, and think about including various types of exercises.

So when thinking about what keystone habits to incorporate into your life, choose one or two things that you know will have the most impact on your current situation. Furthermore, do things that celebrate who you are, and remember that being successful, motivated, and productive are some of the most rewarding experiences we can have. The snowball effect of good habits is enormous. When you build willpower and new

habits, you become more disciplined in various aspects of your life.

Where There's Willpower, There's A Way

Willpower is where most of us fall short, because it's difficult to nurture and develop. The problem is that willpower drives absolutely everything, and it often means that we have to push through discomfort and pain. We need willpower to create new habits, and this requires self-belief and discipline.

Willpower is something that's developed. Losing weight isn't easy, giving up smoking isn't easy, training to run a marathon isn't easy. Once we recognize that ridding ourselves of a bad habit and replacing it with another healthy habit isn't going to be easy, we're a step closer to getting started.

So, we have to be honest with ourselves and try to pinpoint the things that will be the most complex and painful parts of the process, and then build a plan around that. We plan for worst-case scenarios for a reason, and dealing with habits is no different. For example, if you want to stick to a healthy diet, Tom Rath says, 'We buy our willpower at the grocery store.' If we commit to healthy eating, we need to avoid all temptation and only buy healthy food to take home with us. If we only have the option to eat healthy food, we're a step closer to avoiding temptation. Limiting access to unhealthy food means that we limit all temptation. Eventually, healthy eating will become a routine. However you have to understand that there will be times when you need to push through the pain and resist cravings and temptations. Being mindful and self-aware makes this process a lot easier to manage.

Willpower drives everything. Research shows that willpower out predicts almost everything. People with willpower get things done, push through pain and difficulties, and reach their goals. Studies show that you can have the most enormous IQ on the planet, but if you don't have the willpower to support it, it's completely redundant. Duhigg cites research that shows that willpower out predicts IQ by a factor of two.

The lesson here is that we need to learn how to harness the power of our willpower, and it's something that we should be nurturing and teaching. The famous Stanford marshmallow experiment illustrates instant versus delayed gratification. Children were offered the choice between an immediate reward, a marshmallow, or if they waited alone in a room for 15 minutes, they would receive two marshmallows. In follow-up studies, the children who could delay gratification did better on the SAT, and other measures. While the research is controversial and by no means conclusive, it does add some fascinating insight into instant and delayed gratification.

The willpower to delay gratification is important, and we can use it to develop and build habits.

In Conclusion

We all have the power to change and to improve continually. We can change willpower, and we can change habits. We can all "be the change we want to see in *ourselves*, and the world." Habits don't have to be an albatross around our necks. We can change and abandon habits, and we can pick up new and better habits.

The first step is we need to believe that we can change, then we need to

nurture discipline and control. Once we've been honest with ourselves and what we'd like to change, we need to move towards believing we can fix what needs fixing. It's also about pre-empting stress and stressful situations. We often relapse when we're stressed or distressed.

Habits form over time, and they take a while to develop. So be persistent until something becomes habitual. Having self-belief is a critical element of change, and structuring change and accountability in group settings has also proven beneficial. Accountability groups such as Weight Watchers and Alcoholics Anonymous are proven to have a better success rate than when individuals act alone. Alcoholics Anonymous for example, has helped over 10 million people with sobriety.

We want to get to the point where we crave things that are good for us. Building good habits isn't just about consistency, it's about developing the right habits. Healthy habits should scatter into other areas and motivate us to continuously strive to be our best.

And remember, as Duhigg asserts, 'Change might not be fast and it isn't always easy. But with time and effort, almost any habit can be reshaped.' So it's not about being smart, it's about having the willpower to develop and nurture smart habits.