

WELLNESSMONTHLY

Breaking Bad and Cultivating Good Habits | **September 2023**



"Humans are creatures of habit. If you quit when things get tough, it gets that much easier to quit the next time. If you force yourself to push through it, the grit begins to grow in you."

- [Travis Bradberry](#), Ph.D., author of *Emotional Intelligence Habits*

Breaking Bad and Cultivating Good Habits

Habits develop during the course of a lifetime. Bad ones can be hard to break, and sometimes good ones are difficult to sustain.

Habits are similar to but not the same as behaviors. A behavior occurs in response to a situation, stimulus or context. It may be short term and not follow a consistent pattern. A habit occurs automatically and is consistently repetitive. Habits often get their start as behaviors.

People observe behaviors and habits in others and adapt accordingly. For teenagers and adults, social norms, peer influence and coping mechanisms influence the shaping of habits. Studies show that young children who are raised with familiar rituals and routines have a higher likelihood of developing secure, healthy attachments, behaviors and habits as adults than children who are raised in chaotic, unpredictable environments.

It's helpful to be aware of habits. Good ones allow people to conserve energy, do routine tasks with minimal cognitive effort, and free their mind to focus on more complex activities and functions. Bad ones can contribute to poor physical and mental health, and affect a person's sense of life purpose.

What are your habits? You may be surprised by how many you have from the time you wake up to the time you go to sleep. Studies suggest that at least 40 percent of daily activities are habitual. Psychologists say that's because the brain is programmed to repeat what is familiar, regardless of whether the outcome is positive, neutral or negative.

The Habit Loop

The habit loop is a concept explained by [Charles Duhigg](#) in his book *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*. The loop has three components: cue, routine and reward. Cues are triggers that prompt a habit. Routines are a response to the cue. Rewards are outcomes or feelings associated with completing a routine.

Rather than starting with the cue, Duhigg recommends:

1. Identifying the routine you want to start or change.
2. Experimenting with rewards to help isolate the cue.
3. Naming the cue.
4. Making a plan.

For example, imagine you want to get into the habit of writing a personal journal entry every day:

1. Routine: I will record my thoughts in a journal every morning for 5 minutes.
2. Reward: By observing my thoughts, I will be able to take specific actions to feel happier and be more productive.
3. Cue: I will put the journal and a pen where I will see them when I wake up.
4. Plan: When I see the cue, I will set a timer for 5 minutes and start writing.

Habitual cues are often related to location, time, emotions, other people and/or an immediately preceding action. Cues may be internal, such as feelings and thoughts, or external, such as sights and sounds.

Brain in the Driver's Seat

Repeated actions create neural pathways that make it easier for the brain to automatically respond to a cue. The basal ganglia, a part of the brain responsible for habit formation, plays a crucial role in this process.

When a reward is received, the brain releases dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with pleasure and reward. Dopamine reinforces a behavior so it can become a habit. Breaking a habit involves disrupting the habit loop by altering the cue, routine or reward. Even deeply ingrained habits can be changed or stopped with conscious, repetitive effort.

In the journal-writing example, the environment and context established by the writer supports a strong cue-response association. Changing the environment or context may disrupt the writer's daily habit, potentially creating space for other habits to form or preventing the person from attaining the goal of feeling happier and being more productive.

What Can You Do?

Here are some ways to develop, manage and change habits:

1. Imagine successfully breaking or adopting a habit. Visualization helps reinforce commitment and motivation.
2. Ask questions: Does the habit align with your lifestyle preferences? What are the consequences of the habit? Does the habit provide instant or delayed gratification?
3. Set clear, attainable goals that provide a sense of purpose and direction.
4. Be aware of cues, rewards, repetition and environmental changes.
5. To form a habit, incorporate a new behavior into your daily routine and do it at the same time or in the same context.
6. Substitute a negative habit with a positive one. For example, replace a daily afternoon sugar fix with a healthy snack. Instead of biting fingernails, file and polish them. Sometimes just moving around and stretching can help disrupt an unwanted cycle or temptation.
7. Reward yourself for sticking with, changing or giving up a habit.
8. Share your goal with friends, family members, co-workers or a support group. Seek professional help if a habit has a significant negative impact on your life.

Remember, the brain adapts to changes throughout life. It's possible to develop and give up habits, even ones that were formed in childhood. The novelty of new experiences, changes in environment and deliberate efforts to alter routines all contribute to reshaping habits in adulthood.

Here is a related resource:

[How To Start New Habits That Actually Stick](#)