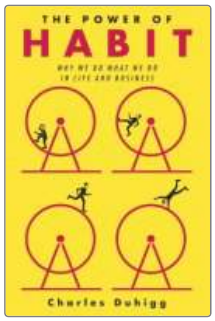

Book

The Power of Habit

Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business

Charles Duhigg
Random House, 2012
Buy the book

You can change your life by mastering your habits.

Recommendation

Have you ever wondered why some people can adopt a healthier lifestyle or realize professional achievement, while others flail and fail? Journalist Charles Duhigg attributes this dichotomy to habit and explains that successful people have learned to control and change their habits. First, they had to understand that the three steps of the "habit loop" – "cue, routine and reward" – determine what individuals do without thinking. By analyzing how undesirable habits such as overeating, excess drinking or smoking operate in that loop by satiating cravings, people who want to change can control habits that may seem to control them. *getAbstract* recommends this fun, educational book to anyone who wants to embark on self-improvement. May the force of habit be with you.

In this summary, you will learn

- How people's habits influence their lives
- How habits work
- How people can change their bad habits

Take-Aways

- Habits are actions people first decide to do deliberately and keep doing subconsciously.
- People can change their bad habits if they learn how habits operate.
- The "habit loop" has three stages: a "cue" propels a person into a "routine" to reach the goal of a "reward."
- Understanding how your habits fit these habit loop stages can help you change them.
- Correcting habits is hard because they fulfill cravings that demand satisfaction, but you can learn not to respond to a habit's cue and rewards with the same old routine.
- Starbucks teaches employees willpower by training them to remain calm in the face of "inflection points" – situations that are likely to weaken their self-discipline.
- Altering "keystone habits" can jump-start good new behaviors or change bad old ones.

- Giant retailers, such as Target, sell to consumers by analyzing their shopping habits.
- Paul O'Neill of Alcoa, Howard Schultz of Starbucks, football coach Tony Dungy and Martin Luther King Jr. shaped change by destroying old habits and creating new ones.
- Debate continues about how much responsibility people have for their adverse actions and how much blame they can place on their habits.

Summary

A Matter of Habit

"Habits, scientists say, emerge because the brain is constantly looking for ways to save effort."

A habit is an activity that a person deliberately decides to perform once and continues doing without focus, often frequently. Think about the complicated procedures you automatically employ to drive your car. Habits develop because the human brain is wired to seek ways to conserve energy. Researchers who study the science of habits observe that patients who lose their memories due to illness or injury still retain the ability to carry out their habits. A patient named Eugene suffered from a damaging attack of viral encephalitis and could no longer even draw a rough floor plan of his home, but he could still find the kitchen when he wanted a snack. He proved that "someone who can't remember his own age or almost anything else can develop habits that seem inconceivably complex – until you realize everyone relies on similar neurological processes every day."

"Automatic behaviors" reside in the deep brain's basal ganglia, which translate deeds into customary actions by using a process called "chunking." For example, picking up your car keys is a chunk of behavior that immediately triggers the other chunks involved in driving.

"Your brain can't tell the difference between bad and good habits, and so if you have a bad one, it's always lurking there, waiting for the right cues and rewards."

The three-stage "habit loop" also develops in the basal ganglia. In the first stage, the brain seeks a "cue" that will put it into automatic pilot and indicate what it should tell the body to do. The second stage is the "routine," or the ensuing habit. Then comes the "reward," which teaches the brain whether the loop in question is "worth remembering for the future." When the cue and the reward connect, the brain develops a strong feeling of expectation, leading to a craving and the birth of a habit. Unfortunately, the brain does not judge whether the new habit is beneficial or detrimental, so hard-to-break bad habits get rooted. However, you can change destructive habits and adopt new, positive ones by understanding and managing the cue-routine-reward loop. Focus on your cues and rewards, and alter your routine to thwart the craving.

Pining for Pepsodent and Begging for Febreze

"As we associate cues with certain rewards, a subconscious craving emerges in our brains that starts the habit loop spinning."

Claude Hopkins made a fortune marketing Pepsodent toothpaste by inventing advertising tactics designed to trigger "new habits among consumers." Brushing your teeth was not a nationwide habit in the US in the early 20th century, but Hopkins understood that if he marketed a desire (that is, a craving), he could make Pepsodent indispensable in Americans' daily lives. He built the craving to get rid of "tooth film" in order to achieve the reward of "beautiful teeth." In addition, Pepsodent provided a minty-fresh feeling in the mouth. Hopkins marketed that feeling and created a national toothpaste habit.

Similarly, Procter & Gamble mastered the habit loop to sell Febreze, an odor-destroying air freshener. After much trial and error, P&G marketers learned that shoppers did not want to admit that their homes smelled bad. Instead, they wanted to reward themselves for housecleaning by making the air smell nice as "a little mini-celebration." After P&G's original Febreze ad campaign failed, its next sets of ads portrayed the product as providing a way to add a satisfying finishing touch to a newly cleaned room – and sales skyrocketed.

Researchers found that the brain begins to look forward to the reward that a habitual routine provides. Encountering the right cue sends the brain into a "subconscious craving" that sets off the habit loop, leading to the routine and the reward. However, this process is not inevitable. Individuals can analyze their cravings to learn which one impels the habit. Similarly, people can manipulate their cravings to better ends; for example, if you value the endorphin rush of exercise, your routine of taking a run every morning can become an automatic habit loop.

"Cravings…drive habits. And figuring out how to spark a craving makes creating a new habit easier."

"The Golden Rule of Habit Change"

Florida football coach Tony Dungy understood the power of habit. Managing the low-achieving Tampa Bay Buccaneers, he realized that if his players could alter their habits and not overthink their plays, they would win more often. Instead of modifying his players' cues, he changed their routines. That is the basis of changing a habit: "Almost any behavior can be transformed if the cue and reward stay the same." Dungy taught his athletes a smaller number of plays but regularly drilled them in applying those plays whenever they got the appropriate cues. This helped the Bucs succeed, though they still couldn't win big games in a pinch. When the Bucs fired Dungy in 2001, he went to the Indianapolis Colts and built a cohesive, winning team using the same strategy.

"To change an old habit, you must address an old craving. You have to keep the same cues and rewards as before and feed the craving by inserting a new routine."

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) offers a similar approach when it helps members set out to change the habits that surround their drinking. While addiction can have physiological aspects, AA focuses on the habit loop and seeks to "shift the routine" when someone encounters cues that lead to drinking. If a person drinks to forget, unwind or feel less nervous, the next step is to determine the causes of that feeling of apprehension. AA's solution is to replace the routine of drinking with a routine of companionship – talking to other alcoholics about the craving and the feelings it sparks instead of finding refuge in a bottle. AA's approach to alcoholism has spread to treating other addictions (food, cigarettes, drugs and gambling). AA teaches that individuals must examine their cravings closely and determine what drives them.

"Asking patients to describe what triggers their habitual behavior is…awareness training, and, like AA's insistence on forcing alcoholics to recognize their cues, it's the first step in habit reversal training."

Additionally, people who wish to change their habits must embrace a belief that says they can change. For some, this has a spiritual element; for example, AA incorporates God in its famous 12 steps. Anyone who wants to change a behavior needs the "capacity to believe that things will get better." For alcoholics, that means being confident that they can meet life's challenges without a drink; for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, it meant being firmly convinced that they could win under challenging conditions. This sense of belief is always more effective if it occurs in a group – such as the community of an AA meeting or of a team in the National Football League.

Habits That Change Other Habits

When Paul O'Neill became CEO of the Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa), he startled its employees by focusing on workplace safety. He did so because he recognized that organizational habits have the power to drive change. He focused on a "keystone habit" – one that, if altered, can cascade through a firm and force other changes in seemingly unrelated areas. He knew the "habits that matter most are the ones that – when they start to shift – dislodge and remake other patterns."

"Some habits have the power to start a chain reaction, changing other habits as they move through an organization…Keystone habits start a process that, over time, transforms everything."

Organizations develop habits that help them do business or accomplish their goals. O'Neill's focus on worker safety forced Alcoa to restructure the way it worked, and that made it not just safer but also leaner and meaner. Changes in safety procedures affected all areas of its business: "Costs came down, quality went up and productivity skyrocketed." Keystone habits also can have this impact in individuals' lives. For example, someone who exercises more tends to smoke and drink less, eat more healthful food and become more productive. Keystone habits force "small wins": transitional accomplishments that help people realize that great successes are possible.

Starbucks's rules for employees inculcate the concept of willpower, which research identifies as the pre-eminent habit determining personal success. Just as scholars achieve positive results in other areas of their lives when they practice academic self-discipline, Starbucks workers improve their lives and careers after they learn the willpower of being cheerful no matter what crops up in their workdays. The willpower they learn to exercise is evocative of the famous "marshmallow experiment" in which researchers told little kids that they could have one marshmallow right away or two if they waited 15 minutes alone with the treat in front of them. The ones who could wait proved to be more successful throughout their schooling based on their "self-regulatory" skills at age four. People can learn willpower as effectively as they can learn to play a musical instrument or speak a foreign language, though once you master willpower, you must keep it exercised and in shape, just as you would work to keep your muscles toned.

"Cultures grow out of the keystone habits in every organization, whether leaders are aware of them or not."

Starbucks teaches employees willpower by focusing on "inflection points" – situations that are likely to weaken their self-discipline (like dealing with dissatisfied patrons). Employees practice routines for handling discontented customers so they can perform them habitually. Fittingly, the company calls this approach "the LATTE method." Its steps are: "Listen, acknowledge, take action, thank and explain." CEO Howard Schultz also instituted a policy of giving staffers "a sense of agency" – knowledge that the company values their opinions and independent decisions.

"Just as choosing the right keystone habits can create amazing change, the wrong ones can create disasters."

Good organizational habits can grow from crises. At Rhode Island Hospital, a mistake in the operating room (OR) showed that employees were using a keystone habit incorrectly. To avoid conflicts, nurses had flagged demanding doctors' names with color codes; nurses knew that if a physician's name was listed in black, they had to capitulate to that doctor's demands without question. This led to a crisis that ultimately spurred OR teams to develop better habits. Now teams complete a checklist together before any procedure.

Organizational habits keep firms functioning; without them, companies would descend into squabbling factions. These habits allow truces; Rhode Island Hospital's new OR checklist enables doctors and nurses to set aside any disagreements and practice safely. Similarly, a serious fire in London's King's Cross subway station in 1987 spurred the Underground's authorities to teach better employee habits and create a disaster plan to ensure future passenger safety.

"A movement starts because of the social habits of friendship and the strong ties between close acquaintances."

Companies also can foretell and, in some ways, control the habits of their patrons. For example, the retailer Target carried out an analysis of consumer data to try to enable them to predict when customers were expecting babies. Their "Guest ID" data program indicated that patrons' shopping habits changed most dramatically when they underwent a milestone in their lives, such as getting married, moving to a new residence or starting a family. Expectant mothers' shopping habits underwent a predictable change. When that happened, Target sent them coupons for baby items. To avoid concerns that such policies were intrusive, Target mixed the coupons, "sandwiching" the baby discounts among other items. Similarly, the promoters of OutKast's song "Hey Ya" helped propel it onto the Top 40 list by sandwiching its radio play between established hits to make "Hey Ya" seem just as familiar to the public as those songs.

"It grows because of the habits of a community and the weak ties that hold neighborhoods and clans together."

Habits in Societies

The 1950s Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott arose in part from "social habits," which "can change the world" when people engage in them forcefully. Dressmaker Rosa Parks was deeply connected to her community: She had "strong ties" to family and friends, and "weak ties" to her seamstress work and church acquaintances. When police arrested her for refusing to give up her bus seat to a white person, the black community rebelled. The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and other leaders created "a feeling of ownership" in her cause to mobilize

black residents to boycott and join other civil rights struggles. Parks's weak ties – like her work for local white families – spread the movement to areas of the community that otherwise might not have become engaged.

"It endures because a movement's leaders give participants new habits that create a fresh sense of identity and a feeling of ownership."

Similarly, a young pastor named Rick Warren built his Saddleback megachurch in California partly on the basis of social habits. He wanted to make churchgoing more social and less of a chore by teaching people "habits of faith." He created small, self-run groups that met outside of Sunday services. The members read and studied the Bible but also were highly social. They discussed the issues they faced daily and supported each other. The weak ties of the main congregation branched out to minigroups with strong ties that built "self-directing leaders," a phenomenon of social habits.

Are People Responsible, or Are Their Habits to Blame?

Society struggles with the notion of habits and asks how much responsibility people bear for habitual actions. Is a gambler who feels sad at home (her cue) and who then gambles away her money (her routine) to blame if she puts her craving for stress relief (her reward) ahead of her family's stability? Is a man suffering the lifelong habit of sleepwalking culpable if, in an unconscious "sleep terror" – an affliction called "automatism" – he strangles his wife? Research suggests that if the brain has no chance to intercede deliberately, the answer is no. A jury did acquit a man who killed his wife in his sleep, but just as creditors don't let gamblers escape their debts, society appears to assume that people bear some responsibility for habits such as gambling.

"This is how willpower becomes a habit: by choosing a certain behavior ahead of time and then following that routine when an inflection point arrives."

Given determination and belief, people can change their habits if they can examine and analyze them to unravel understandable cues, routines and rewards.

About the Author

Charles Duhigg is an investigative journalist for *The New York Times*. His previous works include *Golden Opportunities*, *The Reckoning* and *Toxic Waters*.