

A CONVERSATION WITH CHARLES DUHIGG

Q: What *is* a habit, exactly? It's one of those words we hear constantly, but we never really stop to think about what it means.

A habit is a behavior that starts as a choice, and then become a nearly unconscious pattern. For example, when you were learning to drive, and you wanted to back your car out of the driveway, it took a lot of concentration: you had to check the rearview and side mirrors for obstacles, remove your foot from the brake, mentally estimate the distance between the garage and the street while keeping the wheels aligned and monitoring for oncoming traffic and so on. Now, however, you do all of that automatically. The behavior has become a habit.

Every habit – no matter how simple or complex – has the same structure, a "habit loop." There is a *cue*, a trigger that tells your brain to go into automatic mode. Then there is the *routine*, which can be physical or mental or emotional behavior. Finally, there is a *reward*. Once you understand how habit loops work, you can start changing them.

Q: How much of our daily activities are influenced by habits?

What did you do first when you woke up this morning? Did you hop in the shower, check your email or grab a donut from the kitchen counter? Did you brush your teeth before or after you towed off? Which route did you drive to work? Salad or hamburger for lunch? When you got home, did you put on your sneakers and go for a run, or pour yourself a drink and eat dinner in front of the TV?

All of those decisions weren't really choices at all. They were habits.

Most of the choices we make each day may feel like the products of well-considered decision making, but they're not. They're habits. One paper published by a Duke University researcher found that more than 40 percent of our daily actions are habits. And over time, the meals we order, what we say to our kids each night, whether we save or spend, how often we exercise and so on: they all have enormous influence on our health, productivity, financial security, and happiness.

Q: If habits are so prevalent, and so insidious, how do you go about changing them?

There is a kind of Golden Rule of habit change that study after study has found. At its root is the idea that you can never truly extinguish bad habits. To change a bad pattern, you must insert a new routine into the habit loop.

Of course, that's easier said than done. Habits don't change without a fight. So, to insert a new routine, it should be triggered by the old cue, and deliver the old reward. That's the rule: If you use the same cue, and provide the same reward, you can shift the routine. Almost any behavior can be transformed if the cue and reward stay the same.

Take, for instance, smoking. A smoker usually can't quit unless they find some activity to replace cigarettes. If you want to stop smoking, ask yourself, do you do it because you love nicotine, or because it provides a burst of stimulation, a structure to your day, a way to socialize? If you smoke because you need stimulation, some caffeine in the afternoon, studies indicate, can increase the odds you'll quit. Over three dozen studies of former smokers have found that identifying the cues and rewards they associate with cigarettes, and then choosing new routines that provide similar payoffs – a piece of Nicorette, a series of pushups, taking a few minutes to stretch and relax – makes it more likely they will quit successfully.

Q: Are there some habits that are more important to focus on than others?

Yes. There are some habits – called "keystone habits" – that can cause a chain reaction through someone's life or an organization. A great example of a keystone habit is exercise. When people start habitually exercising, even as infrequently as once a week, they often start changing other, unrelated patterns in their lives. Typically, people who exercise start eating better and getting to work earlier. They smoke less, and show more patience. They use their credit cards less frequently and say they feel less stressed. It's not completely clear why, but for many people, exercise is a keystone habit that triggers widespread change.

Q: I'm guessing people at various companies are pretty well aware of how habits work, right?

Absolutely. At Target, for instance, executives build sophisticated computer programs to analyze shoppers' habits, and then use that information to figure out what they want to buy. If you use your Target credit card to purchase a box of popsicles once a week, usually around 6:30 p.m. on a weekday, and mega-sized trash bags every July and October, Target will determine that you have kids at home, tend to stop for groceries on your way back from work, and have a house with a lawn. It will look at your other shopping patterns, and notice that you sometimes buy cereal, but never purchase milk – which means that you must be buying it somewhere else.

So Target will mail you coupons for 2% milk, as well as for chocolate sprinkles, school supplies, lawn furniture, rakes and – since it's likely you'll want to relax after a long day at work – beer. The company will guess what you habitually buy, and then try to convince you to get it at Target.

Almost every major retailer, including Amazon.com, Best Buy, Kroger supermarkets, 1-800-Flowers, Olive Garden, Anheuser-Busch, the U.S. Postal Service, Fidelity Investments, Hewlett-Packard, Bank of America, Capital One and hundreds of others have “predictive analytics” departments devoted to figuring out consumers' habits.

Q: Are there many scientists out there studying habits?

There are researchers at dozens of universities – including Duke, Harvard, UCLA, Yale, USC, Princeton, the University of Pennsylvania, as well as at schools in the United Kingdom, Germany, and the Netherlands – scrutinizing habits. Not to mention the corporate scientists working for Procter & Gamble, Microsoft, Google and hundreds of other companies who are focused on understanding the neurology and psychology of habits, their strengths and weaknesses, and why they emerge and how they can be changed.

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