

## Making and Breaking Habits

*Curious things, habits. People themselves never knew they had them. ~ Agatha Christie*

**M**any people believe it takes 21 days to master a new habit. Wishful thinking!

Self-help books and motivational gurus have promoted the 21-day myth for at least 50 years, with little research to validate the claim. In a 2009 European study, participants took a full 66 days to adopt a new habit.

As much as we'd like to think we're in control, making conscious decisions, many of our behaviors are automatic. We deny this reality because it's much nicer to believe we're disciplined beings who continuously exercise free will.

A Texas A&M University study reveals how strongly habits rule our lives. Participants kept diaries of what they were doing, thinking and feeling. After reviewing the data, researchers found the diarists engaged in habitual behaviors one-third to one-half the time.

## Anatomy of a Habit

**T**here are three characteristics of habits. They are:

- 1. Automatic.** We're only vaguely aware of performing them and do so without conscious deliberation.
- 2. Routine.** We perform them without any emotions.
- 3. Contextual.** Habits are strongly rooted and paired with situations. We do the same things in the same circumstances.

We'd like to think our habits follow our intentions. If you've ever made a resolution or gone on a diet, you know it's much more complicated. It's hard to forsake an ingrained habit and seamlessly replace it with new-and-improved behavior.

And as you repeat a new habit, it strengthens its hold. Similarly, if you resist making a desired change, it's harder for new habits to stick. Your challenge is to resist old habits long enough to break their automatic pull.

## A Message from Nancy...

**I** have a couple of questions to ask you:

1. Is your business as successful as you think it should be?
2. Are you and your team able to pinpoint the solutions necessary to create positive changes to get where you need to go?



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## 6 Steps to Changing a Habit

Many of us give up too soon when trying to change a habit. It's not that we're weak. Changing habits is hard work. You'll succeed when you are clear about your goals and strongly believe in their worth.

Researchers offer six suggestions for changing a habit:

- 1. Become more aware.** Be acutely mindful of the habit's cues and your unconscious reactions to situations. Increase your consciousness by tracking your progress.
- 2. Visualize small, concrete steps.** Make plans to respond to cues differently.
- 3. Tolerate feelings of discomfort.** Delay gratification. Sit with negative feelings, and wait for them to pass. Do something different. Be patient and forgiving.
- 4. Get support.** Make bets with a friend. Make behavioral change fun, and enjoy the ride. Hire a coach to guide you.
- 5. Subscribe to realistic optimism.** Believe you can change, yet expect hiccups. Focus on progress, not perfection.
- 6. Persevere.** Keep on keeping on. Every small step is progress. Believe in your success long enough and it will happen. Never give up.

## Try the WOOP Exercise

Psychologist Gabriele Oettingen describes the "WOOP" exercise in a 2012 European Review of Social Psychology article:

- **W = Wish.** Write down the habit you wish to change.
- **O = Outcome.** List the best outcome you'll likely achieve from your new habit.
- **O = Obstacle(s).** What stumbling blocks will you encounter?
- **P = Plan.** Make a specific plan that includes cues and responses.

## If/Then Scenarios

When forming a new habit, create a strong link between a specific situation and a new action.

Once this connection has been practiced repeatedly over time, you'll have a new habit.

This means you'll need to list many if/then scenarios. For example:

- If I eat at a restaurant, then I'll order low-fat options.
- If I'm served a big portion, then I will only consume two-thirds.
- If I'm bored, then I'll go for a walk or be physically active instead of eating.
- If I haven't exercised on a particular day, then I will do 15 sit-ups or push-ups.

For each situation, plan to respond in a way that meets your intended behavioral change. If you fail to plan for the "if," your brain will likely respond in its habitual way. Be sure to have a "then" strategy for each "if."

## Conquering the Habit Loop

Your brain can't tell the difference between good and bad habits. Even after you've conquered a bad habit, its old allure lurks in the back of your mind. One cigarette can reignite a smoking habit after years of abstinence.

This is why it's so hard to create new routines. Unless you deliberately fight an old habit by substituting a new routine, the pattern will unfold automatically. When you learn how the habit loop works, you'll find it easier to take control of your behaviors.

Habits aren't destiny. They can be ignored, changed or replaced. When we learn to create new neurological routines that overpower old drives and behaviors (thereby taking control of the habit loop), we can force bad habits into the background.

Changing your routines and habits isn't easy, but it's certainly possible. If you're struggling with behavioral changes, consider hiring an experienced coach to help you clarify, plan and change your habits.

