

Habits are described as behaviors exhibited by people that are acted upon subconsciously. They are the behaviors that we do with little or no thought, ranging from preparing coffee for breakfast once we wake up, to brushing our teeth before we sleep.

It would be interesting to find out how many habits we have as they are the subliminal actions that we carry out that pretty much shape our days and hence our lives.

Therefore, we can say that there is a lot of power in our habits. Perhaps more than we realize. Any action, repeated day to day over a period of time, from saving some money to smoking a cigarette, has the potential to accumulate and result in a larger effect than the single action by itself.

So, the key to controlling and taking charge of our lives lies in comprehending and accepting our habits. Over the following moments, you will develop a grasp of what exactly habits are, their methods of creation and how to control them in order to take charge on your own life while making a change for the better.

Even the smallest habits can have a shockingly massive effect on one's life.

Picture an airplane flying from Los Angeles on its way to New York. During takeoff, if the pilot decided to adjust course 3.5 degrees to the south, it would result in the plane's nose moving just a few feet. Outside the cockpit, the passengers and stewards would not notice the difference caused by the small movement.

However, over the full course of the journey, the change would be much more significant. Instead of arriving at New York, the plane, its crew, and passengers would alight at Washington, DC. A location which is much different from their predetermined New York destination.

Such small changes are not negligible. Rather the reason we do not notice them is that their effect is not immediate. They do not cause an instant impact. For example, if you are unfit and you decide to go for a 20-minute jog, after the jog you will still be unfit – as well as the next day. This works the other way too.

If a person eats a whole box of pizza for supper, it will not make them overweight by the following day. However, if we repeat these seemingly small actions day by day, our decisions will compound into considerable results which can carry significant impacts in our daily lives.

If a person goes jogging for just 20 minutes every day, over a period of time, they will eventually be leaner and fitter. The same goes for the person who eats a large pizza by himself. Eventually, in the long run, he/she will gain weight and become unfit. In both cases, we won't have noticed the changes taking place.

Change requires patience. This is something you need to understand if you are interested in making a change in your own life. In addition to this, confidence is also an important skill to have. You must be confident that your habits will keep you on the right track despite not being able to notice immediate results.

Therefore, if it seems that your habits and behaviors are no bearing any fruit, it is advisable to concentrate on the journey that you are in rather than your present outcomes. For instance, if the issue you are trying to tackle is financial management and saving, focus on the process that is saving the money.

Despite having little money in the bank account while you started off, you can be confident that your trajectory is right if you are consistently saving money each month. While starting off, your current situation may not please you or it may seem like there is a huge mountain that you have to climb.

You may not be satisfied with your current situation but if you keep going and persisting, you will notice that after some time – be it weeks, months or years – that there is actually a big advancement from your starting situation. The journey, that is the trajectory, is very important.

Take for example a millionaire whose expenditure exceeds his earnings. Over a short period of time, he may not be worried about his account balance. However, over a greater period of time, his trajectory would eventually catch up to him and cause him some problems.

One need not revolutionize his actions, habits, and behaviors to cause a major change in his/her life. Instead, you can commence small changes which when applied consistently over a large period of time will bear fruit to big outcomes.

Our experiences mold our habits! Habits are subconscious behaviors and actions that we have picked up from experiences.

What is the first thing you do when you enter a dark room? Instinctively, you attempt to turn on the lights, even without the need for thought. This is an automated behavior that we repeatedly do until the point where it becomes our habit. It then starts to happen automatically.

This brings us to the question “how are habits formed?”. Naturally, our brains react to unfamiliar situations through a process of trial and error. Edward Thorndike, a 19th Century psychologist, portrayed this in a famous experiment which involved cats being placed inside a black box. It was not shocking to observe that every cat placed in the box immediately tried to escape and get itself out of the situation it was put in.

By scratching the box, clawing its walls and sniffing at every corner, each cat strived to find a way out before eventually finding a lever that when pressed would open an escape door. The psychologist, Thorndike, then took the escape-successful cats and repeated the experiment.

The observation was that the cats eventually learned the trick after being subjected to the box repeatedly. Instead of scrambling and struggling for their own freedom, and wasting time while doing so, the cats spontaneously went for the lever. After about 20 to 30 tries, the average cat could maneuver an escape in just six seconds. This situation shows us how the process of escaping became habitual.

The discovery attained by Thorndike was that behaviors that lead to satisfying outcomes tend to be repeated until they become instinctive. Just like the cats in the experiments, we humans also often come across difficult situations to which we find satisfying solutions. And

understanding the nature and power of habits can go a long way in helping us understand ourselves more.

Habits do not just appear from thin air. They begin with a trigger that requires action. Take for instance the 'walking into a dark room example'. Once you walk into the dark room, you automatically receive a cue to perform an action that enables your sight. This arises from the desire to change your state – in this case, the need to see. After this, our reaction comes into play. We flip the switch to turn on the light.

The last step in the process, which can be described as the reward phase, is the feeling of mild relief. We must know that the end goal of every habit is the reward. In this case, it is the relief to be able to see clearly.

When closely examined, every habit follows the same process. The habit of consuming coffee every morning can be broken down similarly. The cue is waking up. This triggers the desire to feel alert in order to perform the next set of actions. Your reaction is walking to the kitchen to make yourself a cup of coffee. And the reward is the feeling of alertness that comes from drinking the coffee.

We should note, however, that not all habits we have are beneficial to our lives. Since we have a grasp of how habits work, let us take a look at how we can build beneficial habits for the rest of our lives.

For new habits to be developed, it requires difficult-to-miss cues and a plan of action.

We have seen that it is cues that trigger habits. We all have different cues for our different habits that we experience on a day-to-day basis. Take for instance the notification sound that prompts you to check your phone.

If you understand that certain stimuli have the ability to cause habitual behavior, then you can use this to your own advantage to change your habits.

One way to go about this is by switching your environment to promote more beneficial habits. Take for example the work of Anne Thorndike, a Boston-based doctor. She had the goal of improving her patients' dietary habits without wanting them to take any conscious action towards doing so. In order to achieve this, she had the hospital cafeteria rearranged.

In the previous set-up, the fridges next to the cash registers had soda only. In the new set up, she put water not only there but also at every other drink station. As a result of this, in the ensuing three months, soda sales decreased by 11 percent. Additionally, water sales increased by 25 percent. The new set up focused on making the cue to drink water more important. As a result of this, Thorndike's patients were making healthier decisions.

We can conclude that even the smallest changes in our environments have the potential to inspire changes in a person's actions and hence habits. If you want to learn to play the guitar, you should leave the instrument at the center of the room for you to access it easier. If you want to consume healthier snacks, you should leave them at the counter, as opposed to having them in the salad drawer.

If you want to respond in a certain way, then you should leave your cues in prominent positions. This helps in triggering you to what you need to do. The more obvious your cues, the easier it is to respond to them.

Another good way to make your cues more prominent is by using implementation intentions. Oftentimes, we are not obvious with our intentions. We may claim that we desire to eat better, but we do not take the necessary actions towards achieving the goal. We simply sit back and hope that magically we will follow through.

The benefit of implementation intentions is that it provides a clear action scheme. It helps in planning out when and where you will execute the habits that you want to develop. Research shows that this method is effective.

Research carried out on voters in the United States of America discovered that posing the the citizens with the questions "At what time will you vote?" and "How will you get to the voting station?" was a more fruitful way of motivating the citizens to go vote than simply asking them if they would vote or not. The citizens posed with the questions of when and where we're more likely to turn up for the voting process.

Therefore, to cultivate new beneficial habits, do not just say “I will go running more often”. Instead say “On Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, when my alarm rings, the first thing I will do is dress up in my running gear and run for two miles.” To further support this, leave your running shoes in a more obvious place than you previously did in order to make your cue more prominent.

Now you not only have a good plan of action, but you have also set up a cue that could easily trigger you. Now see how much easier it will be to cultivate your positive running habit.

The expectation of rewards motivates humans. Thus, making habits appealing will assist you in maintaining them.

An experiment designed to test the neurology of desire was carried out in 1954 by neuroscientists James Olds and Peter Milner. They used electrodes to block out the release of the neurotransmitter dopamine in rats. The result? Shockingly, the rats lost their motivation to live. All desires of eating, drinking, reproducing or doing anything else that could be worthwhile were gone. After a few days, all the rats died of thirst.

Dopamine is also released in the human brain. It is this hormone which is responsible for making us feel good when we do pleasurable things such as eating, playing or having sexual intercourse. However, simply thinking and anticipating these activities also gives us a good ‘shot’ of the feel-good dopamine. This is a method used by the brain to fuel us to conquering the goals, tasks, and challenges in front of us.

Therefore, in the brain’s reward system, simply wanting, thinking or imagining the reward is just as similar as actually getting it. Look at how excited kids become by simply anticipating Christmas day. Or how good you feel while you are simply fantasizing about your upcoming beautiful date.

We can utilize this information to our own advantage when we are trying to cultivate new positive habits. Once we make our habits desirable and something we look forward to, it becomes way easier to not only start them but to also go through with them.

A good technique that can assist us in this is temptation bundling. This is the process of linking a behavior that you presume is important but unattractive to one that you find appealing. The one that you find appealing plays the role of motivating you and generating that all-important hit of dopamine.

An engineering student in Ireland, Ronan Byrne, already knew that he should do more exercise. However, he never quite enjoyed working out – but he enjoyed watching Netflix. So, he resorted to hacking an exercise bicycle. He connected the exercise bicycle to his laptop and wrote a code that would enable Netflix to run only when he was cycling at specific speeds.

Ronan managed to combine both the unappealing and appealing behavior to get the best of both worlds. By linking the exercise to the behavior he was naturally attracted to, he transformed an otherwise unpleasurable behavior to a pleasurable one.

One need not be an engineer to implement this in their life. If you know you should be working out but you also want to catch up to the latest A-list gossip, you can bundle the two and decide to read the gossip magazines only when you are in the gym.

If your thing is watching sports and sports news, but you also need to make sales calls, you can schedule your time such that for every ten calls you make, you get half an hour to watch ESPN or your favorite sports channel.

Since you have set up a reward system for the tasks that you find unappealing, you may even start finding those tasks themselves enjoyable since you will be expecting a reward at the end of performing them.

Making a habit easy to embrace is important in cultivating a new habit.

We spend most our time on behaviors that we find easy to execute. In contrast to doing 100 push-ups or learning a difficult language like Mandarin-Chinese, scrolling through social media almost requires no effort whatsoever. Repeating these difficult actions daily until they become a habit is not as easy as it seems.

Therefore, the key to cultivating and maintaining these new behaviors lies in making them easy enough to turn them into habits. Fortunately, there are a few tricks we can adapt to make this process easier for ourselves.

Firstly, we ought to reduce friction. The author's wife finds sending gift cards such an easy action to execute while the author himself finds it a difficult task. Why is that? This is because of the author's wife stores a pack of greeting cards at home, already arranged by occasion, making it way easier to send congratulations, condolences or whatever she requires.

There is minimized friction when she is required to send the gift cards in any situation since she already has them at home and does not need to go out and buy a single card every time something happens.

This information is also very useful when one is trying to minimize bad habits. Simply increase the friction required to perform the action. If you desire to watch less television, unplug the television from the power source and remove the batteries from the remote control. Now, you would require a lot more effort to start watching television and this could discourage entirely to do so.

Secondly, there is a trick known as the 'two-minute rule'. This is a method meant to make a person familiar with any new activity. The idea behind this is that any activity can be transformed into a habit that is practical in 2 minutes. The principle works like this: if you want to read more, instead of trying to consume a whole book in a week, just read two pages a night. If you want to run a marathon, every day after work simply put on your running gear.

This is a way of cultivating and getting used to new activities to help you instill them into your life as habits. The basic idea is that once you read those two pages, it is likely that you will continue. The rule encourages one to start a process as it acknowledges that getting started is the most important part towards trying to achieve something.

Now, we will look at the last rule on how to use habits to improve your life.

For effective behavior change, make your habits instantly satisfying.

Public health researcher, Stephen Luby, in the 1990s was working in Karachi, Pakistan. In the neighborhood of Karachi, he managed to reduce diarrhea in the locals by 52 percent, pneumonia by 48 percent, and skin infections by 35 percent. But how did he achieve this great accomplishment? By using nice soap.

Luby already knew that basic sanitation and handwashing were vital for good health and reducing illness. Even though the locals understood this too, they were not turning this information into a habit. However, things started changing when Luby started working with Procter and Gamble to introduce a premium soap into the neighborhood for free. Handwashing became a sensation overnight.

This is because the new soap both lathered easily and had a lovely scent. Now, the majority of the locals were washing their hands because it was transformed into an enjoyable activity.

This introduces us to the final and perhaps the most important rule for behavioral change: making habits pleasurable.

Due to evolutionary reasons, this may be more difficult than first thought of. The academics claim that we live in a delayed-return environment. What this means is that people go to their work offices every day, but the return, the reward – a paycheck – do not arrive until the end of the month. We go to the gym in the morning but by night we have not lost a considerable amount of weight if any.

This is unfortunate since our brains developed to cope with the needs of the earlier humans who lived in an immediate-return environment. They were not thinking of the need to stick to a specific dietary plan for a long time, or contemplating saving funds for their life after retirement. Their focus was on immediate desires and needs like finding shelter, securing the next meal or staying alert in case of danger.

Instant returns have the potential to encourage bad habits. After 20 years of smoking, you could develop lung cancer. However, at the moment, smoking eases your mind, relieves you

from stress and satisfies your craving for nicotine which may make you forget about the long-term effects.

It is wise to attach immediate rewards in the case where you are pursuing habits that have delayed returns.

Take for instance a couple the authors know who wanted to eat out less, cook more and eventually save more money and eat healthier. To achieve their goal, they opened a savings account and titled it "Trip to Europe". Every time they avoided eating out, they deposited \$50 to it.

The immediate pleasure they received from seeing \$50 land in their savings account provided the immediate gratification they required to keep them on track for the ultimate, longer-term reward.

Despite making habits pleasurable and desirable to do, we may still fail in keeping up with them. However, we can look at how we can manage to keep up with our positive intentions.

Utilizing trackers and contracts, make a framework to keep your habits on track.

Managing one's own behaviors can be a difficult task. Whether it is trying to do cultivate a positive habit like writing a journal or quitting smoking, it is not all just a walk in the park. Fortunately, there are methods that can help with this.

Tracking your own habits is an easy but impactful technique. There are a number of prominent people known to have done this. One example is Benjamin Franklin who kept a notebook since he was 20 years old, recording adherence to his 13 personal virtues. He did this at the end of every day.

You can also do the same by using a diary to record your own personal virtues and marking off the days where you adhered to your chosen virtues or behaviors. In itself, this is a pleasurable and positive habit as it can motivate you to keep up with your chosen behaviors with the reward of ticking off another successful day.

Another technique you can utilize is developing a habit contract. The purpose of the contract is to impose negative consequences when you fail to adhere to your positive habits.

Bryan Harris, an entrepreneur from Nashville, provides a good example of how you can use this method. He developed and signed a contract among himself, his wife and his personal fitness trainer to lose 200 pounds of weight. He also developed other habits, such as keeping track of his food intake every day and weighing himself every week, to assist him in achieving his main goal.

In addition to this, Harris set up punishments for when he fails to accomplish these tasks. The rates were \$100 paid to his trainer if he failed to keep track of his food intake, and \$500 owed to his wife in case of failure to weigh himself.

His plan was successful. Not only because he was scared of losing money, but also because he did not want to lose his self-respect in front of two people he valued a lot. As social creatures, humans tend to care about the opinions of others. This can be a motivating factor since we know that someone is watching and we would not want to be considered failures in their eyes.

Setting a habit contract for yourself which includes rewards and penalties is a nice way to cultivate and maintain a habit. Additionally, you can involve your close friends and family in the contract to consolidate its legitimacy. As we have seen, maintaining a positive habit, however small it is, can be very vital while you are trying to accomplish big things in life.

Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones by James Clear Book Review

One action cannot change your life. Even a small change in your actions cannot transform your life overnight. However, turning these actions into daily habits will have such a huge impact in your life. It is not about turning your life upside-down, revolutionizing yourself. Rather it is about cultivating a system of positive habits and maintaining them. This is the key to accomplishing remarkable results in one's life.

To introduce new positive behaviors, you can also utilize the 'habit stacking' method. This involves adding a new habit to one that you already comfortably do. For example, if you want to meditate more but just cannot find the time, you can stack it on top of an already existing effortless habit.

For instance, if you enjoy drinking coffee every morning, you can add the meditation after you have had your coffee. Set your mind to meditating every time after your cup of coffee and consistently do this. Build your momentum for this new habit using a habit that you have already cultivated and you now perform effortlessly. This is a smart and effective method that utilizes the natural momentum from a habit that you already have.

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