

How to create a good habit, or change a bad one

by Liane Anderson, Psychologist adapted from *The Power of Habit*, by Charles Duhigg

A behaviour is more likely if there is something that *triggers* that behaviour in the first place. A cue if you like. Brushing your teeth at night may be associated with getting ready to go to bed. As soon as you begin that process it cues you to brush your teeth. A different cue might be the film that develops on your teeth and feeling that that your teeth are grungy.

Additionally a behaviour is more likely if it is associated with a *reward*. The reward can be anything that *you* find rewarding. Rewards can be *internal or external*. An internal reward might be a feeling state. An external reward might be a small present you give yourself or an activity you like. Also a reward can be adding something positive or taking away something negative. For example, an internal reward might be an increase in something positive like feeling a sense of satisfaction or a decrease in something negative like stress. An external reward might be buying a new outfit once you have lost some weight, or having a coffee at a nice cafe at the end of your run. So a reward might be praise, a tick in a box, a gold star, a good feeling, seeing results, feeling better, having more energy etc.



How to develop a NEW habit.

Decide on a **new** positive habit you want to bring into your life like getting fit, eating healthily, flossing your teeth, cleaning your face at night and putting on moisturiser, meditating etc.

Write down one new habit you want to develop. Be specific. State it as a positive rather than a negative. That is - *Eat healthy food and lose 10kg*. Rather than, *Stop eating junk food*.

Find something to TRIGGER the behaviour. No behaviour is going to get going successfully if there is nothing to remind you to do it. For instance, if you are trying to make regular exercise a part of your life then choose a consistent trigger to make you think about exercising. It might be linking it with something you normally do every day. If you want to do it in the morning, then that might be linking it with getting up out of bed. And you could also put your exercise clothes or shoes somewhere you will see them as soon as you get up to trigger you into thinking about exercise. You can even use feeling tired and stressed as a trigger. If you are trying to develop the habit of tidiness,

then use seeing clutter as a trigger. If you are trying to start flossing your teeth use brushing your teeth as the trigger.

Write down triggers for the new behaviour. You can use more than one.

Devise a REWARD. If the habit is really hard for you at first, then think carefully about what the reward might be as it will have to be stronger than the perceived negative of doing it. If for instance you think exercise is too hard and too time consuming then the reward is going to have to be strong enough to get past that. If you are trying to lose weight avoid using some junky fattening food as a reward. (In general don't use other negative habits as rewards.) Sometimes just putting up a chart on the fridge and ticking off every day that you exercise and writing how long you exercised for can be a powerful reward. Feeling a sense of satisfaction that you achieved something that was difficult can be enough of a reward. Noticing that you can go further or do it more easily than the previous week can also be a reward. The good feeling you get naturally from exercise is also a reward but it may take a little while for this to kick in if you are very unfit. Start with something that will be rewarding from the first attempt.

And if it is complex or a big thing you are trying to change make sure you break the task up. If your whole house is messy start with an achievable goal like clearing up a table or a surface. If you have never exercised or are very unfit or overweight start with something manageable like walking for 10 mins, and build up.

Type of reward. Think very carefully about the rewards you choose as this will be the **key to success** in making a habit really stick for life. If there is no reward or an insignificant (to you) one you will be much less likely to keep doing the behaviour. For instance, if trying to lose weight then weighing in and seeing that you have lost weight is a reward and often a powerful one. *However*, the nature of weight loss is that it varies and you will hit plateaus. So if this is the only reward, and you go for a couple of weeks where you are not losing much or any weight, you can very quickly become demotivated. So choose other rewards as well that will be *consistent*. Like the satisfaction of sticking to your health plan. Keeping a diary of your food intake and/or a calorie/ kilojoule count and feeling satisfied that you are staying on target - that is rewarding regardless if the scales are not giving you the reward you crave every time. Generally internal rewards (satisfaction, pride, feeling good, feeling accomplished etc) are more long lasting and effective, *so make sure you have an internal reward*. Clearly if the goal is to lose weight you have to pay attention to that as well, but don't use that as the only reward. And start small. Every step you take is a big deal at first. Then celebrate bigger achievements. One month of exercising most days is to be celebrated. Give yourself a pat on the back or share your success with a friend. Make sure you mark your achievements.

Write down what rewards will you use for this new behaviour? Be specific.

Beating up on yourself. And make sure you really do think about rewarding yourself. Congratulate yourself when you stay on track. Don't just reprimand yourself for any failures. It is unrealistic to expect perfection. Harsh criticism, shaming, and so on tend to be *demotivating* in the longer run. Even if they work temporarily they are not a recipe for feeling good about yourself and being happy and at peace. If you don't meet a goal accept it as part of the process and then get back on track. And then congratulate yourself for getting back on track. Saying, "I already missed one day. I may as well have the rest of the week off," is not the most effective approach!

Preparing for challenges. Change is relatively easy when things are going well. What brings most people to grief when trying to make a change is when obstacles hit. Let's look at an example. You start losing weight. The kilo's are dropping off, you feel better, those jeans are easier to do up. Everything is great. Then you hit a snag. You go on holidays and your routine is harder. You get bad news and your usual way of dealing with that is to comfort eat. You have longer days at work and you are more tired, junk food on the way home seems so much easier than preparing something healthy. Or you are maintaining your routine but the scales are stubbornly showing you the same weight. What is the point of all this effort when there is no difference on the scales, you wonder? Disappointment, failure, self loathing, apathy. You think "I'll have some french fries to make myself feel better." These things are predictable. No change will be smooth sailing all the way. So prepare for them. Think about what is likely to go wrong. If you have tried to switch to healthy eating before for instance you probably know a lot of the pitfalls. Plan for them. Even if you have not tried making this type of change before you can probably imagine some of the challenges you are going to face.

What challenges can you predict you might encounter with establishing this new behaviour?

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Plan *specifically* how you are going to deal with each of these challenges.

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Chart it. Another trick you may want to adopt is to put a chart on your phone or your fridge and record how you are going. If the goal is to *eat healthily and lose weight* then have a calendar and record eating habits or calories/kj's each day. It may also be interesting to note what time you eat snacks and what triggered it. Or when you were most tempted to break the new habit. This may help you to see patterns or anticipate challenging times or situations. If you are trying to exercise regularly chart every time you exercise and for how long/far etc. You get the idea. Use a calendar or a note book or a function on your phone. Make it easy to record and to see your progress.

If you have a setback record what happened and how you dealt with it. Have a plan for if that happens again.

What about habits you already have that you want to change ...

How to change a bad habit

"Nature abhors a vacuum". And so do we. Just trying to stop doing something that has become a habit can be quite challenging. The habit developed for a reason and has kept going because at some level it is being reinforced. The habit could be smoking, eating junk food, drinking alcohol excessively, biting your nails, lashing out in anger, buying stuff you don't need, spending too much time playing computer games and so on. Using the method above, think about what the *triggers and rewards* are for the habit you are wanting to change. AND DON'T CHANGE THOSE. Find a different (and healthy) behaviour that you can substitute in between.

Write down a bad habit that you want to change. Be specific.

Triggers. Some thing, or things, will be triggering the behaviour. For instance, with smoking the trigger might be wanting a break from work. If you drink too much when you go out on the weekend the trigger might be, the feeling "I deserve to have fun after a long work week". Or "I need to really relax and enjoy myself". Or the trigger might be when I make dinner I always have a glass of wine (or 4). Or a habit might be when I feel criticised I get angry and attack. The trigger is feeling criticised. Very often triggers are feelings. Like feeling lonely, stressed, bored, worthless, overwhelmed, hopeless, irritable, scared, unappreciated etc. *Think very carefully about what triggers the habitual behaviour you are wanting to eliminate.* It can help to write it down.

Write down what is triggering the bad habit. Be specific. Pay attention to both external things and internal things. Notice times that are relevant. Do you snack more while watching TV at night? When you feel anxious? When you feel tired? Do you smoke more around others, or when you drink? Do you have angry outbursts at your partner but not at your boss?

External triggers _____

Internal triggers _____

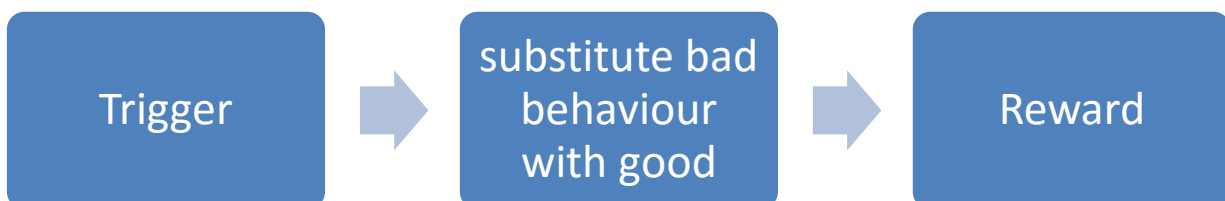
Rewards. Once you have figured out all the triggers then turn to the rewards. What do I get out of the behaviour? It may be something positive that is increased, or it could be something negative that is decreased. So, is the reward for smoking at times, that I get to have a break from work (increase feeling rested or maybe be decrease feeling stressed). Or it settles my nerves when I'm anxious (decreases stress/anxiety). Or, I drink to relax (increases feeling relaxed). Or it might be my

friends and I socialise when we drink and I enjoy the social side of it (increases fun and social connection). Or I drink to forget my problems (decreases distress).

Or I have angry outbursts when I feel criticised and attack others because it releases the tension I feel, and/or I don't have to feel bad about myself because I have turned the attention away from me and my faults. Or I eat junk food because I like the good feeling I get immediately when that chocolate hits my mouth. Or it is comfort food when I feel lonely or hopeless. Or I eat out of boredom and it gives me something to do. The reward may not be just one thing. Or it may vary. So you might sometimes smoke to relieve tension, sometimes to have a break, sometimes because you are bored, and sometimes because you crave the nicotine. It may take time to figure it all out if it is complex. But it can also be quite simple. The rewards may also be *external*. I fit in with my family who all drink a lot. My friends all smoke. Everyone I know gets drunk on the weekend I won't fit in if I don't do the same. So the reward may be social connection.

Write down the rewards you get from the behaviour. Consider both positives that are increased and negatives that are decreased. Consider internal and external rewards.

Substitute. Ok once you have figured out the triggers and the rewards then you need to substitute something else in place of the bad habit between the trigger and the reward. When the trigger to have a cigarette strikes and what you crave is a short break from work - take it. But instead of having a cigarette go for a short walk, talk to a colleague, play a computer game, have a cup of tea etc. Choose something that will work for you to deliver the **same reward** once the trigger happens. And again remember to make the substitute healthy. Don't exchanging one bad habit for another!



I drink at night after work - the trigger might be I feel stressed or overwhelmed. The reward might be I feel relaxed or I stop thinking about work or my problems. So substitute something else for the drinking. Go for a walk, talk to your partner or a friend, have a relaxing bath, read; write down what it is you are worried about, and problem solve it, or let it go.

Some substitutes will require more work. For instance if you are avoiding dealing with an issue you may need to spend some times figuring out what it is you are avoiding and then how to more effectively deal with it. This may require some assistance from others. Learning healthier ways to relax and de-stress may take some effort at first. Learning how to calm yourself and then communicate effectively when you are feeling criticised will take some time and effort. But these things are entirely possible. And will achieve long lasting results rather than a temporary fix.

Write down what you will use to substitute for the old behaviour. It may require different things in some cases. Smoking at work may require a different substitute to smoking at home. Or smoking for a break will require a different substitute than smoking to relieve stress/anxiety. Be specific.

Preparing for challenges. Many changes go quite well until you hit the first real test. It might be a time when you are really stressed or anxious or face a tragedy etc. At times like these it is easy for the old habit to come back. Be aware of this and make sure you have extra support and help to get through these times. Have someone on your side who you can talk to if possible. If it is an addiction perhaps call a helpline - like Quit. Often it is just getting through a short window of time and then the crisis is over. Also be prepared for these challenges as they are predictable.

What challenges can you predict you might encounter with changing this habit?

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Plan *specifically* how you are going to deal with each of these challenges.

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Belief. One thing that makes a big difference in lasting change is belief. Belief that change is possible. Belief that you can do it. Belief that you are worth it. Belief that things can get better. AA uses a belief in a higher power. That may or may not be God depending on the person. It might be a belief that there is something more than physical reality. It does not seem to matter. What does matter is belief itself. Don't ever give up. That will guarantee failure. Just keep going and you will get there in the end. Say things to yourself like, "I know I can do this", "I have done harder things in my life so I can do this". "This is tough but I am doing really well." "I choose to believe I can do this." "A setback is not a catastrophe. I am already moving on." etc. Picture yourself already there.

Come up with some things you can tell yourself that will focus your belief.

Doing it together. Finding a group or at least a friend who is also interested in changing the same habit (or even a different one) can be really helpful. You can spur each other on and help each other when things get tough.

Willpower. Resisting temptation takes willpower. All the above will help with that but you will still need willpower. And willpower is not static. You are not born with it. You develop it. And it is like a muscle - the more you use it the stronger it gets. And the best way to start is with small wins. That is why it is important to have achievable goals. Start small and get a win. That win will help you see you can get somewhere. And it spurs you on to keep at it. Wherever you are at in the process keep small achievable goals in front of you. And when you use willpower in one area the benefits spill over into other areas. People who make a habit of regular exercise tend to then eat better, smoke less, drink less alcohol, turn up on time for work etc. You might just be surprised at what you can achieve.