

Understanding habits

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Hi, everybody, my name is Erica Hanlon. I'm a licensed professional counselor and life coach and today we're going to talk about developing healthy habits.

So if you want to understand habits, how to change them, how to develop them, you have to understand your brain because habits are essentially a shortcut in your brain, a way your brain saves energy, which is one of its three primary motivations, saving energy.

So the other two motivations, in addition to wanting to save energy, is to seek pleasure and avoid pain. So whenever it comes to changing your habits, you've got to keep those things in mind. That's what your brain wants to do.

Recognize how habits are developed

So your brain has to make thousands upon thousands of decisions every single day. Imagine if you had to think through consciously each and every one of those, it would be exhausting, you'd be exhausted before even breakfast. So about 40% of your decisions are automatic, they come from your habits. And again, this is a way for your brain to simply save some energy.

Now, Charles Duhigg, who wrote "The Power of Habits," explains that the way habits work is that there's usually a cue, and then an action, and then a reward. So the action part is where the habit happens. The cue to trigger that action and eventually the habit can be anything from time, place, situation, it can be an emotion that you feel, and then you respond with a certain action. And then after the action, you are met with a reward that then reinforces the action so it eventually becomes a habit. And rewards can be anything that give you pleasure. Remember, your brain loves to seek pleasure, right? So that could be food, music, being in love with somebody, positive thoughts. And it could also be avoiding pain, right? So, the reward could be not feeling bad, not feeling sad, right? Not having to deal with a really annoying sound or an annoying person. And that is how habits develop. There's a cue, an action, a reward, and over time, and with repetition, the action eventually becomes a habit.

Know the reasons behind your habits

So how do you choose a habit? Well, first of all, it's important to recognize that your brain doesn't care if a habit is good for you or not. It cannot differentiate between one or the other. So before you go trying to create new habits or change old ones, it's really important to identify why you want to have this new habit, right? Why is it important to you? How does it fit into your values? What is the message?

So take for example me, I am right now trying to create some new habits around exercise and fitness. One of my big motivations for doing that is being a good role model for my children. Honestly, I kinda don't care that much about what the scale says, or what size pants I wear or that it's healthy. I know I should care about those things, I really don't. But I do care about being a good role model for my children and having them see me live a healthy lifestyle, so it will encourage them to live a healthy lifestyle.

Aim for small, consistent changes

So chances are you've probably tried to change habits in the past and some of those have been successful and some of them haven't been. Here's why we are often unsuccessful when it comes to changing our habits. A lot of us want immediate gratification. We want the reward now, we want the result now and so we feel like to speed the process up and get to that result, we need to take massive action. So like we need to work out for an hour a day, every single day, we need to do 100 squats a day, we need to like overhaul our diets, all of these things. The problem is your brain, remember, is wired to save energy, your brain is lazy, it doesn't want to do all of those things. And eventually, you're not going to be motivated to do all of those things. Your brain likes to take small actions, it wants to do as little as possible.

So when it comes to making changes and developing new habits, smaller and consistent, is always better than big and inconsistent and stopping and starting all the time. So instead of saying I'm going to work out for an hour every day this week, tell yourself, I am going to put on my shoes and my workout clothes and walk out my front door every day this week or three times this week. Chances are once you do that small behavior, it's much easier for you to keep on going, right? 'Cause you already have the momentum. Starting is often the hardest part. So aim for small and aim for consistent, you'll win every time.

Get started today

Another barrier to overcome when it comes to developing new habits is tomorrow thinking. You're always going to want to put it off until the right time or the right circumstances or until you have all the information. It's never going to feel like a time where you're ready to change your habits. You're always going to be the best version of yourself tomorrow. But tomorrow is today. The best time to start a new habit is always today. Don't wait. Start now.

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Visual Cue: Duhigg, Charles. The power of Habit. New York City: Random House: 2012.

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