

e-Health: Making and breaking habits

You make thousands of little decisions each day. But imagine if you had to weigh the pros and cons of each and every one of those decisions. Your brain would be exhausted by breakfast.

Habits save time and energy by putting information together, so we can behave automatically. But what do you do when you want to start a new habit or change an old one?

Charles Duhigg is an expert on habit information and habit change. He says habits follow a formula. First, you have to have a cue. A cue can be anything like a time of day, a feeling, a situation, or a thought. This cue is followed by an action. This action is sometimes followed by a reward. The reward could be anything that feels good. Like a positive emotion or relief from an uncomfortable feeling.

If you get a reward for doing something, it tells your brain to repeat the action, the next time you run into that cue. This creates the habit. So, if you run into that cue, you might even crave the action.

Let's say you want to start a new habit, like exercising. First, you want to identify a cue. Maybe it's your morning alarm. Decide what action you're going to take, like going for a walk. Then afterwards, find your reward, such as feeling good, and really savor the reward. When you repeat this cycle, several times, you'll become one of those people who starts to crave exercise.

But what if you want to change a habit you don't like?

Charles Duhigg says you have to deal with the old craving. And the best way to do this is to keep the same cue. Keep the same reward and change the behavior.

Let's say you smoke when you feel stressed. The cue is stress. The reward is relaxation. The action used to be smoking, but now you can replace it with some deep breathing, working out, or something healthy. So when you feel stressed, you do the new healthy action that leads to a sense of relaxation.

When you learn to manage your habits, you can start to live the life you want.

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