

*“Power of Habit “ by Charles Duhigg*

This book is a surprisingly entertaining and enlightening read. I have summarized some key points from the book, but I highly recommend getting a copy and delving a little deeper.

The scientific understanding of habits has come a long way. Thanks to social science experiments and advances in brain-imaging, habits are quite well understood at this point.

At their core, habits are quite simple and consist of three parts:

**Cue**

**Routine**

**Reward**

To illustrate, I will share a habit I was not happy with in my life.

- **Cue:** My phone “dings,” indicating an incoming text or email.
- **Routine:** I pick up my phone to see who has contacted me.
- **Reward:** I feel a sense of connection with the outside world and momentarily tune out the clamor and demands of my two children.

But even though all habits share the same loop of **cue, routine, reward**, they range widely in complexity. The ding of a phone is an easily identified **cue**. Often **cues** related to eating, for example, can be harder to parse. **Routines** are easy to peg, they are the behaviors we pat ourselves on the back for or regret ruefully in the aftermath. **Rewards**, like cues, can also be challenging to pin down.

More on **cues, routines, and rewards** later.

What is most important for our purposes is that although habits initially require decision-making, over time, a feedback loop is established neurologically and no thought is required. When I first got my smart phone, I experienced a moment of confusion when my phone would ding, “Wait, why did it just do that.” Then I had a choice to make, ignore the alert or check my phone. Over time, I chose the “check my phone” option with increasing frequency, until it stopped being a decision. It became automatic. Unless I was busy with something and consciously chose not to check my phone, I'd pick up my phone each time the alert rang. A pathway was laid in my brain, minimal brain activity was required, and a habit was born.

First the bad news, once those pathways are laid, they don't go away. We can't get rid of well-established **cue-routine-reward** loops.

So, if you can, get rid of the **cue**. That is how I changed my too-frequent phone checking habit: I turned off the ding. Luckily for me, that alert isn't actually necessary. Ever since I turned off the ding (the **cue**), my phone often languishes on the kitchen counter for hours at a stretch.

But in many cases, we can't get rid of the **cue**. The good news is that the habit loops are subject to tweaking. **The key is to understand and retain the cue and the reward, but change the**

**routine.** And the **routine** is the behavior we laud or loath. So to change a bad habit into a good habit: keep the **cue** and the **reward**, find a new **routine**, do it for long enough, and in time it will become automatic, i.e., a habit.

This may sound simple enough, but cues and rewards can be elusive little buggers. Duhigg recommends the following approach for sorting them out.

The Framework for changing a habit:

- **Identify the routine**
- **Experiment with rewards**
- **Isolate the cue**
- **Have a plan**

### **Step 1: Identify the routine**

Identify the components of your loop. The **routine** is easiest to identify: it is the behavior.

### **Step 2: Experiment with rewards**

Determining the **cue** and the **reward** can be more challenging. Duhigg uses his daily cookie habit as an example of how to “experiment with rewards.” First, he made a list of possible **rewards** the cookie habit could be satisfying. Was it sating his hunger? Relieving boredom? Giving him a break from work?

Then he started experimenting with **rewards**. One day he tried eating an apple. If the **cue** was hunger, that would meet the **reward**. Another day, when he got the urge to get his daily cookie he walked around the block instead. If all he needed was a break, that should meet the **reward**. Then he tried coffee for an energy boost, and finally he tried going to a friend's desk for a chat.

He recommends jotting down the first three words that come to your mind after you try each new **routine**. “Relaxed” “Saw flowers” “Not hungry” are the examples he gives. Then set an alarm to go off in 15 minutes. Check in with yourself to see if the urge is still there when the alarm goes off. He found that after chatting with a friend, it was easy to get back to work, urge gone. So he concluded that the **reward** for his behavior was the socializing in the cafeteria that always occurred when he went to get his cookie and ate it.

### **Step 3: Isolate the cue**

Because **cues** can be so difficult to identify, Duhigg recommends looking at broad categories. Experiments have shown that almost all habitual **cues** fit into one of these five categories:

- **Location**
- **Time**
- **Emotional state**
- **Other people**
- **Immediately preceding action**

So to figure out any given **cue**, answer the following five questions the moment the urge hits:

- **Where are you?**
- **What time is it?**
- **What's your emotional state?**
- **Who else is around you?**
- **What action preceded the urge?**

Keep doing this each time the urge strikes you, until a pattern (hopefully) emerges. Duhigg found his cookie habit was triggered by time. He got the urge between 3 and 4 each afternoon.

#### **Step 4: Have a plan**

Once you've identified all the components of your loop, you can start to work on changing the behavior. But because the response to the **cue** has become automatic, a non-thinking response, it is crucial that you have a plan in place for when the urge next strikes.

Here is the plan Duhigg wrote for himself: “At 3:30 every day, I will walk to a friend's desk and talk for 10 minutes.” He had to set an alarm to make himself do it. He didn't feel like doing it at first, but by the time his watch broke several months into his new routine, it didn't matter. He got the urge to go talk to a friend everyday between 3 and 4.

Those four steps are a great starting point for shifting unwanted habits. However, research shows that when people shift habits, more often than not they revert to their unwanted behavior when the going gets tough. **Unless they have the secret special sauce that carries people through rough patches: support.** It can be the support of a group, the support of a spouse and friends, or the support of religious faith. The form isn't important, but on-going support of your goals/new habits is crucial to long-term success.