

HOW TO

SIMPLE

HABIT

FORMATION

STRATEGIES FOR
LASTING CHANGE

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UNDERSTANDING HABITS

It stands to reason that if you change your habits, you can change your life. After all, your life today is a sum of your habits.

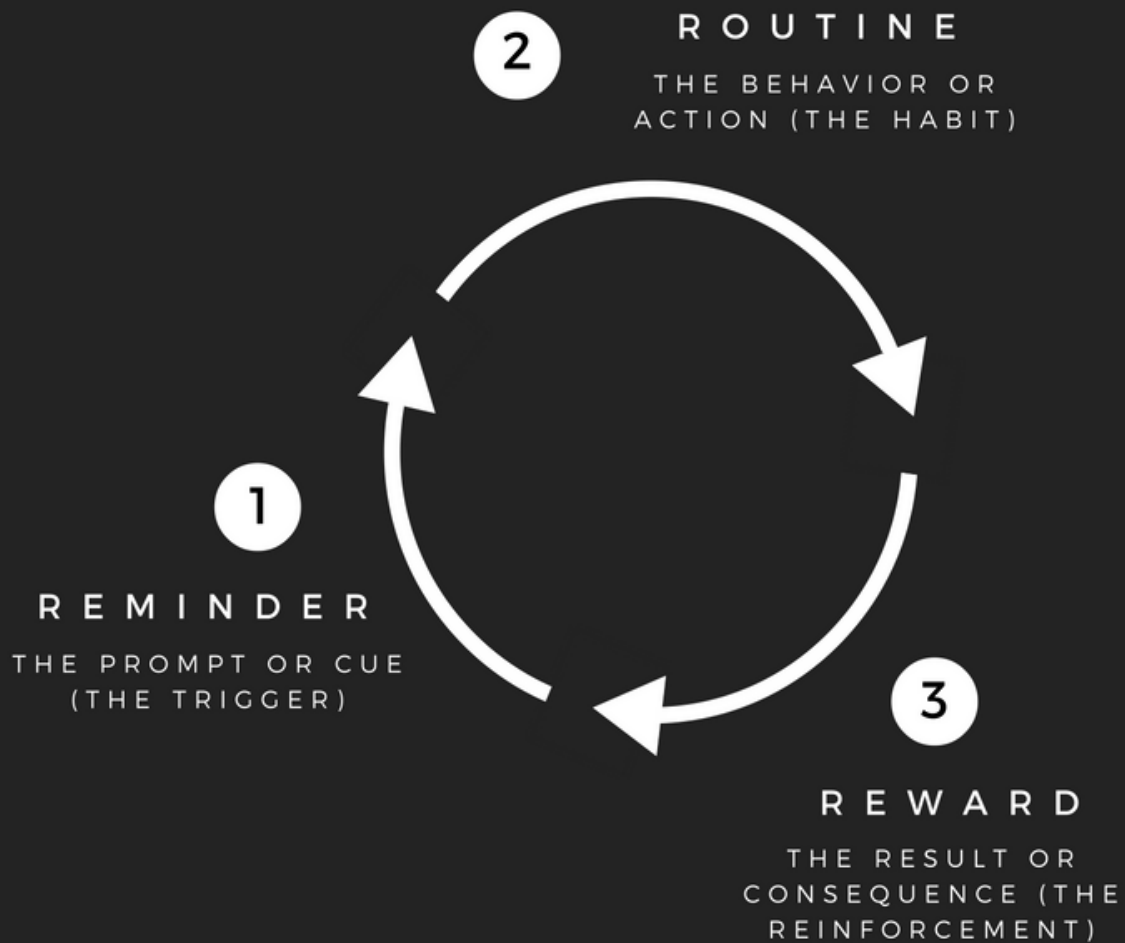
But what is a habit, exactly?

A habit is a regular tendency or practice that comes naturally to you. It is routine. Second nature. Habits don't require thought. They make things automatic, which makes them extremely powerful.

Gretchen Rubin, the preeminent habits expert, explains, **“Habits make change possible by freeing us from decision making and from using self-control.”**

Habits are part of a psychological pattern of reminder, routine, and reward. In behavioral psychology terms, reinforcement is a consequence (reward) that will strengthen an individual's future behavior (routine) whenever that behavior is preceded by a specific antecedent stimulus (reminder). Eventually the behavior becomes automatic, and you don't even need to think about it anymore.

THE HABIT FORMATION LOOP



SO, HOW DO I CHANGE MY HABITS?

Simply put, any habit can be changed by creating a plan, tracking your progress, and remaining consistent. However, the degree of ease will depend on how deeply entrenched your habits are and what sort of behaviors you replace your habits with.

This guide will take you through the principles of successful habit formation that lead to lasting change.

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GRETCHEN RUBIN

**HABITS ARE
THE INVISIBLE
ARCHITECTURE
OF EVERYDAY
LIFE**

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KNOW YOUR DESIRED OUTCOME

What are your goals?

Why?

Are you changing a habit, or creating a new one?

What purpose does it serve?

How will your life be different?

Be specific. Write it down. Consider not just what you want, but why you want it.

And here's a tip: intrinsic motivation usually trumps extrinsic in the long term. In other words, if you motivated by how you feel internally (rather than receiving external validation), you are much more likely to see your goals through to the end.

KNOW YOURSELF

Self-awareness is a value with far reaching benefits, not least of which is being able to more effectively change your behavior. Are you a morning person or a night person? Are you a moderator or abstainer? The more you are in tune with yourself and your needs, the more effective your plan will be.

Are you someone that prefers small, manageable baby steps? Or do you get a rush of motivation from big, sweeping changes? This is an individual preference, so be sure to pick the right approach for you.

What kind of personality do you have when it comes to habits? Are you an upholder, or do you require accountability? Take [this test](#) at gretchenrubin.com to learn about your habits type.

Being honest and in tune with yourself is an indispensable part of any plan to bring about change.

MAKE A PLAN

Utilizing what you know about habit formation, combined with your self-knowledge, you can now put together a plan for changing your habits.

I suggest beginning by breaking your habit into three steps:

What is the triggering event? What events precede the habit?

What is the behavior? What are the specific steps you need to take?

What is the reward? What outcome will you experience, both short and long term?

Once you've figured out the different components of the new habit you are trying to develop, it is time to figure out what else you need to consider in order to be successful.

Consider the following when coming up with your plan:

- Do you have any pre-established habits that you can piggyback this new habit onto?
- How can you make it stupidly easy for you to stick to the habit? Think accessibility, effort, cost, etc. Set reminders on your phone. Literally schedule in the time to do it. Prep your meals in advance. Take the TV out of the bedroom. Don't bring sweets into the house. And so on.
- Do you need someone to hold you accountable?
- Can you make any changes to your environment?
- What challenges are you likely to face? Reflect on past failures. What triggers your behavior (good and bad!)? Be prepared for saboteurs.
- Commit to it and write it down. In your phone, on post-it, in your journal, in a blog post or on Facebook. Wherever. Just make it real.
- Identify and designate your support system for when shit gets hard.

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**BAD HABITS
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ABANDON
TODAY THAN
TOMORROW.**

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VISUALIZE SUCCESS

Once you have a very clear idea of what you specifically want to accomplish and how you will accomplish it, imagine what it would be like to successfully incorporate this habit into your routine.

I encourage you to literally sit down and engage in visualization to accomplish this - especially if the habit you are hoping to instill or change is a large one.

Sit or lay down in a comfortable position. Close your eyes. Breathe deeply and slowly, relaxing into the moment.

Fully imagine yourself performing the habit with ease. This vision version of yourself has already completely adopted the new habit and it is now automatic.

Watch her closely and fill in all of the details of the scene. What are you wearing? Where are you? What smells, sounds, or sights are available to you? How do you feel as you engage in the habit? What are your specific thoughts? What emotions do you feel? Fully feel every sensation, physical and emotional.

It is important to engage all of the senses, and to view the scene from your perspective - not as if you are watching yourself in a movie.

If you want to take it even further, you're invited to imagine various scenarios in which your likelihood to adhere to your habit would be challenged. For instance, if the habit you are trying to form is going to the gym in the morning, visualize a scenario in which you wake up late. Does the vision version of yourself just give up and go about her normal morning routine? Or does she remain calm and focused on her goal, quickly getting out of the door and making her way to the gym. Allow yourself to encounter obstacles and envision how you would respond to these obstacles in a constructive, conscious manner.

Don't skip over any steps; fully imagine each one in real time.

This practice works in the other direction to. In addition to visualizing yourself adopting a new habit, you can visualize yourself living without a bad habit.

You can further reinforce these visualizations by writing them down in your journal when you are done.

This visualization practice will be extremely helpful for you to follow through on your habits (and other desired life changes).

Repeated visualization conditions your neural pathways so that the behaviors feel more natural and familiar when it is time to actually perform them; these practices also help to increase confidence and self-efficacy.

Additionally, studies have shown that visualization can help reduce stress and anxiety, and is even an important part of professional athlete training. In one notable study that appeared in the North American Journal of Psychology in 2007, athletes who mentally practiced a hip-flexor exercise had strength gains that were almost as significant as those in people who actually did the exercise on a weight machine.

MONITOR YOUR PROGRESS

You manage what you monitor, so track your progress - especially at the beginning.

You might groan at the idea of tracking and monitoring your behavior, but I assure you, it really is a worthwhile effort. If you aren't reliably tracking your progress, you are likely to under or overestimate your adherence to your habit which can result in the habit failing to set. Tracking can also help motivate you when you are feeling unfocused.

Fortunately, there are a lot of really innovative, easy to use (free!) apps that can help with this. I recommend the following:

- Habitica
- Productivity
- My Fitness Pal
- Fitocracy
- Balanced

Monitoring and tracking is an important step to remain consistent and focus.

BE PREPARED FOR HABIT LOOPHOLES

Habit loopholes, described by [Gretchin Rubin](#), are logical traps we often fall into that undermine our efforts to change our behaviors. Be aware of (and prepared to deal with) these common logic loopholes. These loopholes can be devastating to your behavior change goals.

- False choice loophole – “I can’t do this, because I’m so busy doing that”
- Moral licensing loophole – “I’ve been so good, it’s okay for me to do this”
- Tomorrow loophole – “It’s okay to skip today, because I’m going to do this tomorrow”
- Lack of control loophole – “I can’t help myself”
- Planning to fail loophole, formerly known as the “Apparently irrelevant decision loophole”
- “This doesn’t count” loophole – “I’m on vacation” “I’m sick” “It’s the weekend”
- Questionable assumption loophole
- Concern for others loophole – “I can’t do this because it might make other people uncomfortable”
- Fake self-actualization loophole – “You only live once! Embrace the moment!”
- One-coin loophole – “What difference does it make if I break my habit this one time?”

Do you find yourself falling victim to any of these loopholes when trying to form new habits? What loopholes are you most likely to invoke?

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

CONSISTENCY

Our habits are what we repeatedly do. And what we do every day matters a lot more than what we do once in awhile. As Aristotle said, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.” Be CONSISTENT for at least 30 days (60 is ideal) when starting a new habit. This is so easy to say, but much harder to do. However, consistency is the golden ticket to success.

FIND YOUR KEYSTONE HABIT

Keystone habits (or heart habits, or cornerstone habits) are habits that have the power to transform your life by making it easier to implement other smaller habits. Examples of keystone habits could be going to bed and waking up at the same time everyday. By sticking to this routine and getting enough sleep, you are setting yourself up for success in other areas. You are less likely to overeat, you are more focused and attentive at work, you have time to meditate in the morning, and so on. This one habit has the power to positively influence the rest of your behaviors.

GET TO THE ROOT

Sometimes there could be deeper issues at play. It is crucial to understand the root of a bad habit. Often times, bad habits are formed as a way to deal with or avoid stressors or internalized pain. You can experience some success replacing bad habits with more positive ones, but in order to fully transform bad habits hiding deeper issues, you will need to dedicate some time and effort into resolving those problems. Don't just glaze over them.

HABIT CHAINS

Creating sticky habits is far easier when we make use of our current routines, instead of trying to fight them. The concept of if-then planning is built around environmental “triggers” that we can use to let us know that it's time to act on our habit. Also known as implementation intentions, this tactic involves picking a regular part of your schedule and then building another “link in the chain” by adding a new habit.

MISTAKES HAPPEN

You are not a failure. Just learn from the experience, make adjustments if needed, and keep going. Do not expect perfection. That is a losing battle.

If you find that your habit routine consistently breaks down, examine why. Are there any triggers you can eliminate? Are you falling victim to a loophole (explained below)? Or is there an environmental factor you can improve on?

Ramit Sethi shared his experience on 99U:

When I sat down to analyze why I wasn't going to the gym, I realized: my closet was in another room. That meant I had to walk out in the cold [to] put on my clothes. It was easier to just stay in bed. Once I realized this, I folded my clothes and shoes the night before. When I woke up the next morning, I would roll over and see my gym clothes sitting on the floor. The result? My gym attendance soared by over 300%.

If you are experiencing a lot of issues getting your new habit off the ground, you can also consider scaling back your habit transformation to just one small habit or half-habit. Trying to change your bed routine? Just go to bed 10 minutes earlier. Over time, improve or change. But you might be experiencing difficulty by taking on too much at once.

MINIMIZE YOUR OPTIONS

Making repeated choices depletes mental energy. In order to maintain long term discipline, create routines that eliminate or minimize your need to make decisions. For example, wearing a uniform everyday or eating the same food regularly. The research is quite clear and well supported in books like *The Willpower Effect*.

UTILIZE MANTRAS

Mantras are a great way to direct energy and reinforce your intentions. [Leo Babauta](#) explains how using mantras to quit smoking:

For quitting smoking, mine was “Not One Puff Ever” (I didn’t make this up, but it worked). When I wanted to quit my day job, it was “Liberate Yourself”. This is just a way to remind yourself of what you’re trying to do.

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GRETCHEN RUBIN

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