

Create a Healthful Habit That Actually Sticks

Good health is built on a foundation of good habits – helpful behaviors that are automatic. However, good habits can be oh-so-hard to develop. Likewise, bad habits (such as eating quickly, skipping meals and opting for a greasy lunch) are difficult to break.

Habit Loop

Journalist Charles Duhigg discusses the science of habits in his bestselling book, *The Power Of Habit*. Habits are beneficial because they give your brain a rest and allow it to work on other problems. You no longer use much brainpower to tie your shoes, back out of your driveway, or log onto your computer because these behaviors became habitual.

Habits follow a three-part pattern called the habit loop. First there is the cue, something that triggers a behavior or routine. Following the routine is the reward. For example, a cue might be seeing a box of donuts in your office kitchen. The routine is to grab a napkin and a donut and eat the donut on the way back to your desk. The reward, a delicious taste in this case, helps your brain remember this habit loop, causing you to repeat this behavior the next time you see donuts in the office kitchen.

Create a New Habit

You can use knowledge of this three-part loop to help you form new habits. Piggyback your desired routine onto an existing behavior. If your goal is to walk after breakfast daily, why not piggyback your walk onto putting your breakfast dishes in the dishwasher? Every

morning, immediately after closing the dishwasher, head out the door for a walk. The cue is loading the dishwasher after breakfast. The walk is your routine. And the reward is the praise you give yourself for following through on your goal. Keep this up and eventually you'll have a new healthful habit.

Break an Old Habit

If your goal is to end an unhealthy behavior – say, eating cookies in the afternoon – experiment with the cue and the reward. What cue is sending you to the box of cookies? Is it boredom, an activity you repeat on a daily basis (such as checking your email), your close proximity to a vending machine, the sound of other people eating, etc? Perhaps you can eliminate the cue or insert a different routine in the face of the cue.

Also look for the reward. Are you satisfying hunger? If so, a healthful snack will also do the trick. Are you distracting yourself from work? Are you enjoying social time with co-workers while you snack? If it's one of these, there are other ways to get these rewards too.

When thinking about your lifestyle goals, consider the good habits you want to develop and the bad ones you want to break. Experiment with various cues and rewards. Keep it up until you find just the right mix. Soon you'll find yourself practicing healthful behaviors as if they were second nature.

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