From the days of William James, psychology has been fascinated by the notion of habit. What is it? Where does it come from? Perhaps, most importantly, how do we change it?

While various psychologists over the years have taken a variety of approaches to changing habits, it’s only now with sophisticated...
brain imaging that we are starting to see the neurological impacts of habits, giving us new clues into how to change them.

While the elixir still eludes us, Charles Duhigg has brought us a few steps forward in his book *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*.

Habit, it turns out, is a funny thing in the brain. It seems almost impossible to eradicate. Even when a person creates a brand-new lifestyle, for example getting advanced education, successfully holding down a job, and training for a marathon, it turns out that scientists can still see the old habit pathways in the brain. Yet we know that neuroplasticity remains with us through our adult years. This begs the question, if our brains can change, then why is it so hard to erase bad habits?

**The Model**

Duhigg draws on the research from various disciplines – advertising, sports, addiction, religion and others – to create a model for how habits are formed. Essentially, we start with some sort of cue: a trigger from our senses that kicks off the habit. In response to the cue, a routine follows, which is the habit, an action that we mindlessly execute. This habit provides us with some sort of reward, which reinforces the habit. When we encounter that cue, we mindlessly embark on the habitual routine again and again.

There is, however, a driver that propels us forward, and that is a craving for something. Duhigg chronicles various habits that fulfill a craving for distraction, for stimulation, for a clean scent. Presumably, Seligman’s PERMA could fit in here. Habits could be brought about by a craving for positive emotions or accomplishment or relationships.

**How to Change a Habit**

The brain likes habit because habits are low-energy. Duhigg demonstrates this with reference to neuro-imaging done of rats that run a maze over and over and over again. There is significant brain activity while the learning takes place, but once the habit has been instilled, the brain activity takes place only at the cue (e.g. the ‘click’ as the gate opens) and the reward (the chocolate at the end of the maze). As the rat becomes faster and faster in the maze, and the habit is more and more ingrained, the brain can rest more and use less energy.

Habits are very efficient. When the maze is changed, and the old habits no longer work, the brain activity has to pick up again, using more energy.

Armed with this knowledge, Duhigg crafts a series of experiments which he recounts with great humor trying to figure out how to break his habit of eating a cookie each day, a habit that has resulted in weight gain. As he explains in the book, he writes down the answers to a series of questions each day when he starts feeling the craving to get up from his work and go get that cookie. He identifies the routine, which is about the cookie. He experiments with different rewards, discovering that it is a social element he is craving, not hunger. He isolates the cue, discovering that it’s related to time of day. He then creates a plan using the same cue, and providing the same social reward but with a different routine.

**Further Discussion**

Duhigg draws heavily on research from across different fields. He refers to Baumeister’s work on willpower and Duckworth’s work on grit. He also cites William James, Aristotle, and Walter Mischel, the man who performed the marshmallow study. What’s not to like?
Duhigg’s formula for changing habits reminds me heavily of Heidi Grant Halvorson’s use of “if... then...” statements to harness the brain’s power for seeking out contingencies and executing plans. Duhigg’s model is simple to understand, and makes a lot of sense. It could be very powerful, yet still requires work, mindfulness and some will power to get started.

**Not Just Habits of Individuals**

Duhigg didn’t stop after the first section of his book, “The Habits of Individuals”, even though it would have been a very fulfilling book if that was all he tackled.

The second section is “The Habits of Successful Organizations.” Here Duhigg looks at companies like Starbucks and Target. In fact, an [clip of Duhigg speaking on Target](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOZ0YsW8k5k) has been making the online viral rounds recently.

The third section is about “The Habits of Societies.” Duhigg discusses the habits of friendship that spurred the civil rights movement in the United States. He also debates the neurology of free will and whether society is right to condemn one sort of habit and yet to make allowances for another.

I found this to be a very thought-provoking book and an excellent read. It draws on research, weaving in an easily-digestible series of stories, much in the vein of Malcolm Gladwell or Freakonomics. Duhigg parses habits finely, realizing that the science is ever evolving and offering hope for even the worst nail-biters.

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**References**


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**Images**

*Training for a marathon* courtesy of Lululemon Athletica
*Rat race* courtesy of John Huyn
*Cookie break* courtesy of PIXELTREE
*Nail bitter* courtesy of Hammonton Photography

Not seeing the pictures for the book links? [Disable Adblocking for this site to view them.](#)
ELEANOR CHIN  

March 19, 2012 - 3:57 pm

Lisa, As a coach, I am really enjoying this book for precisely the reasons you cite. The author draws on lots of research, breaks the topic into logical pieces and helps you apply it to yourself and others. I’ve already used it to help a client. The verdict is still out on the routine and reward but, the creating a cue seemed to help so far! Thanks for a great summary. It will keep me reading as I’m only part of the way through. Eleanor

DERI LATIMER  

March 19, 2012 - 4:50 pm

Hi Lisa! I wrote a book called ‘Wake Up to Your Habits’ http://www.derilatimer.com/?page_id=1443 stemming from my experience working with individuals in organizations over 20 years as a speaker, trainer and consultant. I find this article fascinating – and aligned with what I have seen in my own practice. Thanks for sharing! Warm Regards, Deri
Thank you for your interesting article on habits. I have, for many years, pondered the whole subject of making and breaking habits (I have had several I have formed and broken over the years). I am wondering if the making of a habit (like eating a cookie in a social setting) is more about the “avoidance response” (avoiding anxiety, having to speak, not wanting to appear on the outer) which then becomes the cue for eating the cookie, biting the nails and so on to avoid feeling uncomfortable. Rather than the urge to be rewarded through the sugar fix or to feel good.

We know the avoidance response is practically impossible to extinguish in animals and, I believe, one of the hardest responses to extinguish in humans, because it works. If you can avoid something, why try anything else?

In some of my own habits, eating cake, it is when I am avoiding starting an assignment that I might anguish about or when about to do some boring chore. I go on the computer to avoid watching tv (which I find is a waste of time and buys into my early childhood conditioning of always finding something to fill in my time).

Chris

Thanks all for your comments. I really enjoyed the book and would love to hear how it’s working for you and your clients.

Chris – to your point – I would have enjoyed reading more about the good habits and how those form over the years as well. Duhigg doesn’t get into whether it’s more about the “avoidance response” and, as I recall, all of his examples were about a positive “towards” motivation rather than an “away from”. I may be oversimplifying though. The motivation for the cookie, in his example, was actually a need for social interaction. The nail biting was a need for stimulation.

Like you, I certainly do things to “avoid” something else – but I wouldn’t say it’s a habit – it’s just an avoidance manoeuvre. I’m keenly aware of my lack of motivation to do whatever task – and it requires grit, more than habit, to get me into it.

Hi Lisa!

Hi Nick – certainly for me, the meat was the “cue, routine, reward” insight. I haven’t seen the video on the book’s sales page though, so I can’t comment much on that. I would say that the book does a good job of justifying the author’s model and applies it across a number of different habits and motivations, so that’s helpful towards understanding and applying it yourself (or with clients). I also did like the extension into organizations and societies.

Since writing this review, I have become aware of one other critique “out there” which I was not knowledgeable enough to address in this review:

Charles Duhigg completely overlooks any work / research done by Peter Gollwizter [http://www.psych.nyu.edu/gollwitzer/] and I’d like to acknowledge Ben Dean for his email in which he expressed this omission.
Hi Lisa,
Thanks for your response. You may like to check out the Amazon video if you’re a visual person; just a bit of an added memory boost 😊

I dug-up the direct video link for you:
http://www.amazon.com/gp/mpd/permalink/mT09LN01GDSX/ref=flash_player_2_preplay

Finally – thanks for the Gollwitzer link; that page is pure gold!
Looking forward to your next article! 😊

-Nick

LISA SANSOM

April 1, 2012 - 9:11 pm

Thanks Nick- the video is almost word for word from the book. It’s definitely his “clincher” at the end of the book – the home run hit out of the park, as it were. Most of the book is about justifying and proving his cue – routine – reward theory. And I’m glad you enjoy the Gollwitzer page! Subject for another book, perhaps?

Lisa

AMANDA HORNE

April 11, 2012 - 2:06 am

Hi Lisa
Thank you for the review which not only introduced us to what the book has to offer, but also provided practical advice. Many years ago (pre-dating some of the more recent research which you cite) a facilitator told us that 'bad' habits are mis-directed energy. If we could understand what this energy is about we could channel it in another more helpful way. This might address the question above about avoidance. I also like one of the comments above about 'waking up habits' – this of course opens up the discussion about mindfulness and being conscious and aware. Finally, at the recent Australian Positive Psychology and Wellbeing conference, Todd Kashdan talked about how being more aware of the emotions under the emotions can tell us more about what we feel and can then help us to redirect behaviours. E.g. 'feeling bad' might be about guilt, anger, etc.

Thanks again!
Amanda

MOONA LIZA

November 28, 2014 - 10:40 am

This is great book, and you need to read it. How is that for a definitive opening line? The reason it’s such a good book is because it uses research to explain how habits are formed and changed. Everyone knows someone who was out of shape, or was a smoker, and then in what appeared as if almost overnight, changed themselves in a short period of time. How did they do that? They formed new habits and changed old ones, that’s how.
Judy Krings: Brilliant review, Aren. Sean’s “Mud and Dreams” plastered a smile on my face from the...

Alex Sternick: Dear Ryan, It is so warming my heart to read your testimonial Of course, Singing in Gibberish...

Ryan Niemiec: Dear Alex, I also love singing with my kids in Gibberish! You are a real “treat” for this...

CoolWriter: To tell the truth, we lie almost constantly and every day: from small tricks and hushing up small flaws...

Admin K.H.B.: John, Given that this article was posted in 2009 and the work by Brown, Sokol, and Friedman to...

Ruth Hayes: Nice article. Related to this – a framework for ethical speech that was shared with me and that I...

John: You support a completely discredited hypothesis (Losada Line)?

نماثوب: Thank you Elaine . your review very great

Rebecca: This article really resonates with my personal journey of understanding my own cycles. Thank you for further...

David: As a man, I can say you nailed everything there is to know about men in relationships. In 2 lines! Secret #1:...

robinhoodi: Yeah! Very true, actually I heard about Carin Rockind even in the past that she has taught thousands of...

Lisa Buksbaum: You are both talented and wise.... think of all the lives you've enhanced. Twice graced with...
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Random Posts
The Habits of Successful Organizations. The Habits of Societies. The first third of the book was my absolute favorite. In it, Mr. Duhigg describes how habits are formed, what the parts of the habit loop are, and what to focus on in order to change your habits. All-in-all, I highly recommend The Power of Habit to anyone interested in changing bad habits. If you also happen to be fascinated by the science of how our brains work (as I am), then you’ll love this book. I loved listening to the audio version of the book while driving and doing other things around the house. If you haven’t tried Audible yet, you can click here to download 2 free audiobooks when you sign up for the free trial. You’re welcome.

A few months ago, I assigned a book to my senior managers — Charles Duhigg’s “The Power of Habit.” They smiled wanly as they accepted the books, prepared to slog through a business book with little bearing on their real lives. We were all pleasantly surprised — the book turned out to be more interesting and potentially transformative than any of us expected. The premise is simple — we create and maintain habits to conserve mental energy so we can think about more complex and difficult issues; these habits can be good or bad or neutral, but once established, they never really leave us, but lurk The Power of Habit Review. Duhigg has managed to combine the scientific research with his own ideas and personal experiences in such a way that the book tells many extremely compelling stories, while teaching you everything you need to know about habits. If I could have you read only one book this year, this would be it – although Duhigg has published a new book in 2016, Smarter Faster Better, hmmm. Nah, go with The Power Of Habit! « Buy the book on Amazon || Read the summary on Blinkist ». What else can you learn from the blinks? Why habits stick and how that changed the toothpaste industry.