



How to Change a Habit

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Welcome to the Preview Version of How to Change a Habit

This preview section covers an introduction to trial periods and one advanced technique, triggers. As you will notice in the table of contents on the next page, greyed out items are not included in this preview version, to give you an idea of the content you should expect from the full version of the book. Some ideas you'll only find in the full version:

Replacement Theory, Operant Conditioning, Logistics, Leverage, Using Habits to Achieve Goals, How to Run an Experiment, and many more...

However, this preview version is still packed with some good tips. Both trial periods and triggers are great tools for changing habits and I hope regardless of your decision to get the complete version, they will aid you in taking control of your habits.

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Introduction

Introduction

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then, is not an act, but a habit.”
-Aristotle

Do you have a habit you want to change? Maybe you want to quit smoking, stop eating unhealthy foods or turn around negative thoughts. Do you have a habit you want to create? Maybe you want to exercise more, stick to a new diet, work more productively, become friendlier or just enjoy life more.

Whether you want to remove a bad habit or create a good one, this e-book will give you the means to achieving it. To most people changing a habit is a tremendous struggle. Spending years building up to a change and going through repeated failures before something sticks seems fairly common. I’m here to say that changing habits is nothing more than a skill, like riding a bicycle, and with the right information and training it is a skill anyone can develop.

I created this e-book, not to be read in one sitting and then forgotten, but to serve as a handbook for making changes. Many of the concepts I’ll talk about in this book are unnecessary for someone who is just beginning to make changes. Triggers, operant conditioning and stability points are useful to understand but aren’t necessary to start making the changes you want.

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While reading this book, I'll start by giving you the information you need to start changing habits right away. So if you've been struggling with a goal, whether it is losing weight, keeping a budget or improving your self talk, I'll start by giving you the basic tools you need to make the change.

From that point I'll discuss more advanced techniques for changing habits. These tools will work when basic methods fail. These advanced techniques will also allow you to look at your habits in a new light. Instead of seeing obvious needs for improvement, you can start to experiment with new ways of living and thinking.

Remember first that habit changing is a skill. You probably couldn't play the piano without any practice or instruction. Similarly, don't make unreasonable expectations for your ability to change habits without having any practice or instruction. Instead try to use this book as a guide to give you more options and a better understanding.

If you've struggled with changing behaviors before, don't be so quick to blame your willpower or motivation. Without an understanding of how habits actually work, most of the time a habit fails will be due to a poor strategy rather



Trial Periods

The First Push

The first push, which makes up 99% of the total energy you will put into creating a permanent habit takes place in the first month. If done successfully, after the first month the new habit will be a reflex, requiring only a little bit of energy to handle changes in situations. Even if you eventually let the habit slip after several months, the real source of the problem usually occurred somewhere in the first month.

There is a story of two lumberjacks that illustrates this problem. Both lumberjacks are cutting down trees in a forest. But day after day, the first lumberjack cuts down almost double the amount of trees. One day, the under performing lumberjack asks his friend how he manages to cut down as many trees, and wants to know what he can do to become as strong as his friend is.

The first lumberjack replies that he is no stronger than his friend, but each morning before cutting trees he spends an hour sharpening his axe blade. This, he says, is the secret to his success.

Habit changing is much like cutting down trees. When you see someone

who succeeds in a change, it is easy to say that they have more willpower or strength than you do. But usually the difference is that the other person, often without realizing it, did some serious sharpening before he started.

The first thirty days are like the hour the axeman spent sharpening his blade before cutting trees. They may seem insignificant when you keep a habit for months or years, but they account for most of your results. Properly executed the first thirty days are the most important aspect to making a habit stick.

The Thirty Day Trial

As I mentioned in the introduction, I'll discuss techniques for changing behavior from the core basics, to the more advanced tricks. The Thirty Day Trial is perhaps one of the most fundamental elements of changing habits. Basically put, a Thirty Day Trial means that you will commit to following the guidelines of your habit for 30 consecutive days without exceptions.

Following a Thirty Day Trial alone is enough to solve 50-75% of problems with habits. The rest of this book is simply refining this core process.

Why Thirty Day Trials Work

Thirty Day Trials come from a fairly old idea of committing to a change for a specific amount of time. I have seen many suggestions from 7 days to several months. Thirty days isn't a magic number and it doesn't have any special properties. However, thirty days as a commitment does have several advantages over other time periods:

Less than three weeks is usually not enough time to make a habit completely automatic. Some advanced techniques can make a change almost permanent in less time, but I've found they are often difficult to use and don't work consistently.

More than two months requires too much of an initial commitment for all but the most necessary changes. It is easier to commit for the first thirty days which make up 95% of the work, rather than commit for ninety days or a year which account for only another 1-4% of the effort.

Thirty days is roughly a month which makes it easy to fit into a calendar system.



Advanced Methods

Triggers

The first advanced tool for making habit changes stick is called a trigger. A trigger is simply understanding and reinforcing the cue that starts your habit. Before you can use a trigger to make your habits more resilient, you need to understand how a habit works.

What most people consider a habit, isn't one habit, but many minor habits linked together. These minor habits are small links of thought and behavior that form a larger pattern you generally call a habit. Although smoking may be seen as a habit by some, it is actually many habits linked together. The chain of habits for smoking might be:

1. Feel the impulse for a cigarette
2. Look for cigarette
 - a. If no cigarette is found, go to store/borrow from friend
3. Pull cigarette out
4. Light cigarette
5. Smoke

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This is heavily simplified, but the point is that habits aren't simple, but complex patterns of behavior.

Where do triggers come in? Well a trigger is nothing more than the first link in the chain of a habit. By controlling the first few links in the chain you can eventually control the entire output. Think about it: if you put most your effort on the first few actions that get you to the gym, wouldn't it seem fairly automatic to work out?

The idea behind triggers is an old one that comes from a certain Russian scientist and his dogs. Ivan Pavlov was researching digestion when he realized that in his process for feeding the dogs, they would begin to salivate before he brought their food. This was because a neutral stimulus, in this case a bell, was rung before feeding.

Soon the dogs associated the bell with food and would salivate only after a bell was rung. Triggers work on the same principle by intensely conditioning the first few minutes of your habit. This focus on the first few minutes creates automatic associations along the rest of your habit chain. Instead of using a bell and drooling you want to use your own ritual and result with the feelings that will move you to use your habit.

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The goal of creating a trigger, is to make a highly consistent ritual based on some initial stimulus that automatically redirects your behavior. The ritual has to be short, simple and highly focused to lead to the new habit you want to install.

A trigger you create for your habit has two components, your cue and your ritual.

The Cue

The cue is a piece of stimulus that precedes your habit, like the bell for Pavlov's dogs. Some habits have a fairly uniform cue, while others may have a couple different initial signals. This may sound a bit complex but the cue for your trigger is actually fairly simple.

Consider you want a habit of waking up early, what would be your cue? This has to be one of the easiest: the sound of your alarm clock. That sound of your alarm clock is a universal piece of stimulus that gives you the option of waking up. If you wanted a habit trigger for an early riser habit, the alarm clock would be an obvious cue.

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What about other habits, like going to the gym? If you're lucky you will have a couple independent cues that are triggered before going to the gym. This could be going at a particular time of day, going after or before work or once you wake up. But what if you don't have a specific external event to trigger going to the gym? In those cases internal feelings form your cue. Your sudden impulse decision of whether to go or not would be the initial stimulus.

The best cues are external (time of day, alarm clock, after tasks, work, etc.) but when there aren't any consistent external cues for when you should perform your habit, you need to look for internal cues. Internal cues are harder to make triggers, but they will work.

The Ritual

The most important part of your trigger is your ritual. This should be a concise set of actions no more than fifteen minutes long, and often it can be as little as a few seconds. Your ritual needs to be strongly associated with your habit, so it should be done every time in the same fashion.

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*And if you really want some leverage, check out this interesting website:
SucceedOrElse.com*

Rituals may sound a little bizarre, but you already use rituals without realizing it. When I think of my process for going to the gym, I know that once I am at the gym I may do various workouts. But the five minutes of preparation before I go, from grabbing my bag to changing at the gym and signing my name on the entry register is almost an identical sequence. And this was all done without consciously intending to create a ritual. Because rituals develop naturally, consciously using a trigger is the process of ensuring two things: practice and consistency.

Practicing Your Ritual

Practicing your ritual can be done before the trial starts or it can be simply monitored once the trial begins. Practicing before your trial starts means setting aside an hour or two from your schedule to practice the initial few minutes of your habit repeatedly. This will make it easier to follow your trigger once the trial begins.

I've used this before when trying to wake up early. Setting aside thirty minutes, I practiced waking up immediately after my alarm went off. My ritual was only a few seconds involving standing up and walking around. By conditioning this a dozen or more times it allowed me to remember my trigger

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when I was actually using the habit itself.

Ensuring Consistency in Your Ritual

The most important part of your ritual is that it is consistent. If you don't use your ritual every time you run your habit it loses power. The benefit of using a ritual is that you use it every time. Having a short ritual before going to the gym isn't useful if you only use it once or twice a week.

Should You Use a Trigger?

If you are new to changing habits, the answer is probably no. Keeping triggers in mind might be useful, but it will make your initial efforts too complicated. Keep it simple and focus on your trial. If you have been struggling with a change and a Thirty Day Trial doesn't seem to be enough, I'd consider using a trigger to help reinforce your habit.

Some habits are better candidates for using triggers. To create effective triggers a habit should be:

- Narrow - Your habit should have a fairly simple path of behavior. Sticking to a diet is harder to make a trigger because you never eat in only one situation.
- Positive - Your habit should be to do something, not to avoid something. Quitting smoking is a negative habit (negative as in absence, not bad) because you are eliminating something.

Going to the gym is a good habit for a trigger but quitting smoking is harder because the first links in the chain can sometimes be unclear. If you want tips for those habits, see Replacement Theory.

I found using a trigger invaluable in helping me establish the habit of waking up early. The cue with this habit was easy – the sound of the alarm clock. Forming a ritual meant putting myself in a darkened room and setting my alarm clock one minute ahead of the current time. I practiced waking up to the alarm clock and jumping out of bed.

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This practice doesn't form the habit for you, I still needed time to form the ritual perfectly in actual conditions, but it did give me a head start in forming a usable trigger.

Keep in mind that a trigger will usually make the first few days more difficult (as you are more precise in your conditioning) but it will make the habit reinforced better in the long haul. Triggers are a good strategy if you can make it through the first few days, but have trouble keeping a habit for months.

Thanks for Viewing the Preview Version of
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I hope that this small sampling of the ideas, tools and advice from the full version of How to Change a Habit was useful to you. For \$19.99 you can see some of the other ideas only available in the full-version of the book:

- Replacement Theory -- Why attempts to quit smoking, diet and give up bad behaviors often fail, and how to design new changes to avoid these problems.
- Operant Conditioning -- How to make changes last long-term and make it more difficult not to continue your improved way of life.
- Habits of Thought -- How to tackle stubborn habits of thought to boost confidence, optimism and focus.
- Using Habits for Goals -- How to use habits to achieve goals by moving your behavior to new plateaus of excellence.
...And dozens more ideas to help you change a habit.

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